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Marxism, cataphatic and apophatic: an exchange.

Salvage does not usually host debates, but in the spirit of comradeship we offer this space to two Salvage writers, Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim, to defend their version of 'cataphatic' Marxism against China Miéville's [critique](#). Below is a short reply by China Miéville.

The More you Know: In Defense of Enlightenment Marxism

by Harrison Fluss & Landon Frim

In a recent article for *Salvage*, China Miéville responds to several of our earlier pieces in *Jacobin Magazine* and elsewhere. One target of Miéville's criticism is our rationalist brand of Marxism, indebted as it is to the Radical Enlightenment legacy. He casts our differences in starkly theological terms; Ours is described as a "cataphatic" (i.e., orthodox, discursive, rationalist) Marxism while he prefers the "apophatic" (i.e., open, mystical, humble) alternative. These are real philosophical differences, and Miéville does a service to Marxist discourse in illuminating such a critical and productive demarcation.

Simply put, Miéville understands our "cataphatism" as proceeding from positive knowledge claims about the world at large and human nature in particular. The problem with cataphatism, contends Miéville, is that it does not properly attend to the "subterfuges of coherence" inherent to existence. In other words, nature and history cannot be adequately captured by any master narrative. In trying to rationalize the not-totally-rationalizable, the cataphatic Marxist risks ignoring the unexpected; those potentials for spontaneous revolutionary action which come without warning. Worse still, cataphatism, mirroring the religious orthodoxy from which it gets its name, has a tendency toward an inflexible dogmatism.

Apophatism, instead, takes its model from the negative theology of certain religious discourses (especially gnosticism, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Nicholas Cusanus). Its supposed strength lies, ironically, in its weakness. That is to say, the apophatic Marxist will not be as easily perturbed when reality defies their expectations; their humility makes them more flexible than their "knowing" counterparts.

Miéville's fundamental distinctions are correct. We do believe that knowledge is fundamental to politics, and that action unguided by reason is no action at all, but mere reaction. Nonetheless, if we are to justifiably choose between the "apophatic" and "cataphatic" worldviews, it will be necessary to clearly outline the essential elements of each in a schematic manner.

The necessity of this decision should not be underestimated. For there is no such thing as a “default” worldview or metaphysics. So much of the political discourse on “humility” uncritically begins with this presumption; namely, that a humble attitude is no worldview at all, but rather a prudent weariness about saying too much.

However, in Miéville’s hands, “humility” is no mere attitude, but is elevated to a metaphysics unto itself, a “proud humility” as it were. Apophatism presumes some very specific things about the nature of knowledge, the knowability or mysteriousness of Nature, and our place in it. Therefore, humility, if one chooses this approach, must be defended, rather than taken as a neutral starting point. One must take responsibility for one’s humility, and not merely scoff at those who don’t buy into the ontological picture it presumes.

Miéville is more honest than many in the “apophatic” camp, recognizing his humility as a robust worldview. What is interesting to us, however, is how such a worldview is justified (or not) in the first place.

To that end, what we set out here are the six premises which appear indispensable to grounding the apophatic outlook. These are laid out austere for the reader’s consideration. Following this, we offer our six criticisms of these positions:

(1) Horrific things are irrational and therefore “unspeakable.”

In the face of extreme violence, exploitation, and poverty, the apophatist will claim that it is both impossible and immoral to conceptualize such suffering. To do so would be to rationalize the irrational, and worse, to objectify the sufferer themselves. Instead, these traumas must be recognized as “unspeakable,” rather than as ordinary objects of human comprehension. Miéville explicitly defends a politics of mourning and rejects as “bullying” the dying words of IWW organizer Joe Hill, “Don’t waste any time in mourning. Organize...” The apophatic Marxist holds that, in a world of unspeakable trauma, one cannot proceed except through mourning.

(2) Horrific things are evidence that reality itself is fractured and not entirely intelligible. (Life is suffering).

This follows from premise one. Since irredeemably bad things do, in fact, occur (deny it, and you are a bully), then the world in which these horrible things occur cannot be fully intelligible. It must be marked by fracture and lack. There is no guarantee that the local contradictions in existence can or will be subsumed within some more intelligible, rational whole. So not only can we never know the whole, but we can’t permanently fix things either. Solving problems will only ever generate new ones.

Life is marked by suffering, in part, because our desire to know and to comprehend is necessarily frustrated. This is a tragic view of reality, not unlike that of the existentialists. Like Sisyphus, we are condemned to continually push the boulder of human endeavor up the mountain, only to see it roll back down again.

(3) Socialism does not end, but will be a higher form of alienation and ineffability.

Miéville still wants to engage in radical politics. What can this mean in a world of unintelligible gaps and lacks? Essentially it amounts to Samuel Beckett's idea of "failing better." The tragic nature of reality is irresolvable through social or political revolution; socialism will still be marked by tragic suffering, just in a different, albeit elevated, form. Somehow and in some way, socialism will be "unsayable" rather than "unspeakable," and "mysterious" but not clouded by "mystification." Here we have a negative theology of the sublime, the inky abyss of Hell is as inscrutable as the blinding light of Heaven. The future good is so transcendent from the current degradations of late capitalism that it amounts to a "marvelous alienation."

(4) A totalizing reason is indecent.

This follows from point three. Not only is reason incapable of comprehending the whole, but doing so is immoral. Socialism is "beyond the rupture" of revolution, much in the same way that Heaven only comes after the Final Judgment. The future is "unsayable" precisely because it is indecent even to speak about a future state of justice in our presently fallen world. We may gesture towards it; we may mourn its distance from us; but we may not speak definitively about its character.

(5) Limiting reason makes room for the will, emancipation, and politics.

Only because the future is unknowable, is it truly "open" in a metaphysical sense. And only because the future is open, does human agency, action, and emancipation themselves make sense to the apophatic thinker. In a fully deterministic world, free will is precluded. According to the (cataphatic) determinist, our decisions are governed by a combination of rational decision making and compulsions - both social and psychological. But the apophatic worldview demands something *supra*-rational. It demands that we can author our own actions, independent of a governing reason.

This, too, has its correlate in theology - namely the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing). Likewise, political emancipation is incompatible with the rationalist's deterministic worldview. We cannot be free if, from the point of view of the universe, every one of our actions is predictable ahead of time.

(6) There is a third way between rationalism and irrationalism in politics.

The apophatic Marxist, being a Marxist, wants to resist the implication that a politics beyond reason is simply irrational. The risk is palpable, since without rational criteria, there appears to be no necessity in promoting socialism, as opposed to adopting a liberal or Right-wing politics instead. The putative solution in Miéville's essay appears to be a gesture toward something beyond cataphatic reason, on the one hand, and irrational quietism, on the other. This is why he invokes the concept of the "hyperphatic" - a fusion of apophatic and cataphatic thinking.

This hybrid term is a supplement to his other neologic acquisitions inspired by Ernst Bloch, ranging from “possi-being,” and “concretely-mediated,” to the “processually-open.” The point is that the apophatic Marxist believes they can retain their radical credentials by invoking reason, just so long as this is a limited and humbled reason. Unfortunately, Miéville’s essay gives little indication as to how rationalism and the non-rational are meant to coexist in political discourse.

A cataphatic, i.e. Enlightenment, Marxism will reject each of these six propositions. Ideally, each criticism would be accompanied here by a thoroughgoing demonstration. However, given the confines of this particular discussion, we must make due with rather concise explanations for each:

(1) Very bad things are intelligible.

When we speak casually, it is perfectly right to say that this or that social phenomenon is “irrational.” Overproduction is “irrational”; interminable war is “irrational”; poisoning our air and water is “irrational”; and so are the pervasive instances of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty, unemployment, and the growth of fascism across the globe.

But let’s be precise in our language and clear in our meaning. If by “irrational,” we simply mean horrific-- even hard to describe -- then you will get no criticism from us here. But Miéville, instead, appears to commit the fallacy of equivocation. The notion of the “irrational” (semantically parsed as the “unspeakable,” the “non-rational,” etc.) does double-duty for him: here denoting that which is bad, and there denoting that which is incomprehensible. But war, racism, poverty, and capitalism are bad in ways that are rationally known to us. They can be adequately conceptualized. Indeed, that is why we can know that they are bad to begin with, e.g., why peace is preferable to the bomb, and why we can posit solutions to these scourges.

We Marxists will sometimes speak carelessly of social “contradictions.” This category is too often lumped into the same goulash of “irrational,” “bad,” or otherwise “complicated” things. But again, the specific meaning is crucial: A contradiction is, by nature, something that is resolvable. This is what Hegel had over Kant. The Hegelian contradiction is something that is intelligible because reconcilable; the Kantian “antinomy,” on the other hand, is a permanent limit on Reason -- the opposition between two eternally irresolvable terms. Antinomies, in other words, are tragic.

Hegelian contradiction is optimistic; contradictions are intelligible relative to the rational whole, i.e., the total “order and connection of things” (to borrow from that other great rationalist, Baruch Spinoza). It is through understanding the totality of things that we can likewise comprehend and resolve social contradictions. For instance, do racism, war, and poverty come about *ex nihilo*, out of Pandora’s box; or are these social maladies comprehensible in light of historical materialism? The rationalist will insist on the latter.

(2) Apophatic thinking risks paralysis.

Miéville will want to have it both ways -- claiming to perceive that certain traumas emerge from capitalism, and that capitalism is bad. But on the other hand, it is so thoroughly bad as to be "unspeakable." Capitalism is an abyss that envelops us all and throws a shroud of mystification over everything.

To be sure, Marx himself will speak of ideological confusions and superstitions, including commodity fetishism. These do emerge from the material "substrate" that is capitalism. But the point is that, in understanding capitalism, we can diagnose these confusions, and compare them to a more adequate way of thinking about our collective situation. Such "cataphatism" is the precondition of collective political action.

Miéville's noumenal way of thinking would have a hard time justifying, in the first place, that our present traumas are authored by capitalism. So shrouded in mystery and confusion is our current epoch, that he would be hard-pressed to oppose a conservative who claims that social ills are the result, instead, of our fallen nature, or God's abandonment, or a long-forgotten original sin. Who is to say, when all that is bad is "unspeakable" anyway? Apophatic politics, then, risks lapsing into conservatism or a bland liberalism.

Miéville is aware of this risk. However, he gives no definite program for avoiding a lapse into reformism or liberalism (or worse). It is our position that this is not Miéville's own failing, but that of apophatism itself.

(3) We can get there from here.

Another key supposition of the apophatic Marxist is that the goal of socialism involves an absolute break from our current degradations. This sounds radical enough, but in fact implies a politics of waiting. Only a superman can save us, to paraphrase Martin Heidegger. Or if not an actual human being, then merely the unpredictable coming of some messianic age or event, as per Walter Benjamin. Given the unspeakableness of capitalism, Marxism loses its predictive power and its status as a science. The classical Marxist formulations about crises and revolution go out the window.

The (cataphatic) Marxist will point to intelligible features of capitalism (tendencies toward overproduction, fall in the rate of profit, and the growth of unemployment and poverty) as motors for social revolution. They not only incite upheaval, but also greatly determine its character. This is why modern socialist revolutions are of a distinct character as compared to pre-capitalist peasant or slave revolts. Socialist forms of society, such as collective ownership and production, as well as the abolition of scarcity, only ensue from the preconditions of generalized commodity production, as established under capitalism.

Simply put, "we can get there from here." It is the knowable features (and limitations) of capitalism which point the way toward a better, freer, more egalitarian future. To demand that social revolution be a leap of faith into an "unsayable" future is the demand for Permanent Tragedy; what we demand instead is Permanent Revolution.

(4) Reason must be totalizing, or else the game is lost.

The apophatic Marxist will rarely criticize reason *tout court*; their objection, more often, is levied against a “totalizing reason.” (In this way, their critique is quite performative - not daring to affirm irrationalism as such, but only wanting to be “humble” about our intellectual faculties.) In this, Miéville artfully makes use of an analogy whereby our “island of knowledge” is surrounded by an ocean of ignorance. We can make rational progress, and increase our store of knowledge; however, as the island expands, so too does the length of the shoreline - i.e., the horizons of our ignorance. The more we know, the more we realize we do not know.

From a purely empirical point of view, this is undoubtedly correct. In the 21st century, we don't know a lot about quantum physics, dark matter, wormholes, and the like. (And we know that we don't know so much about these.) This can be contrasted with our 12th century ancestors, who had no idea about the depths of their ignorance on such matters. These weren't even objects of speculation at the time.

Nonetheless, this is a very partial view of what knowledge is -- as though all knowledge consisted of merely piling up discrete facts. To the contrary, we can only accumulate facts, make sense of these, and search for new ones, if underlying our explorations is a rational schema. Only if we consider reality as a whole to be objective and governed by intelligible laws, does it even make sense to search for particular facts to begin with.

Even basic scientific experimentation seems to demand an experimental constant, whereby the rational *principle of sufficient reason* operates: No new effect will follow unless some variable changes. But these are all “totalizing” claims about the whole of reality, and not merely the humble and piecemeal increase of our small island.

The island analogy has knowledge situated within a sea of ignorance, that is, an abyss. However, this ignorance is merely a projection and reification of human limitations. It is as though the boundaries of human awareness are also the limits of reason as-such; that Nature is an anarchic mystery apart from the light added to it by human knowing. True rationalists would never be so anthropocentric, instead insisting with Hegel that “the real is rational, and the rational real.” There is a determinate order and connection to Nature, even when we aren't looking.

(5) Reason is the backbone of politics, not its straightjacket.

What can be said for the natural sciences applies even more so to the social sciences and politics. We must certainly engage in local experiments when it comes to political tactics and the good life. But these experiments only make sense, can only bear fruit, against the background of certain totalizing, rational claims about Nature and human nature. Only if we know something of human flourishing as-such, can we judge the successes or failures of particular experiments in living. Only if we have a trans-historical standard for human well-being, can we judge the progress or regress of historical epochs. We must be able to judge despotism and slavery as inferior to

socialism and equality. Marx, in citing the French Materialists, states that before we consider “human nature as modified in each historical epoch,” we must “first deal with human nature in general.”

Deny all this and your politics must be valorized, not against the objective character of human beings, but rather according to your own subjective will and feeling. On this latter view, socialism is good because it is what “we” socialists do and affirm, or what motivates and “works” for our politics. But this is subjective idealism (in the worst sense of the word). As opposed to this, we may paraphrase Lenin’s dictum that, “Marxism isn’t true because it is powerful, it is powerful because it is true.”

(6) There is no “third way” between rationalism and irrationalism.

Rationalists are often accused of presupposing a dualism between reason and unreason; that “there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” But the charge is misapplied. The rationalist does not hold to any such dualism because, properly speaking, there is no “outside” to reason. There is no abyss, no nothingness, no chaotic unreason to speak of.

In fact, it is the “humble” apophatic thinker who poses the dualism. The island of knowledge in the sea of ignorance is telling in its stark contrast between reason and its opposite. Of course, as we have already established, the apophatist will stop short of boldly affirming unreason. Instead, their brand of humility demands something subtler; this is the “appreciation” of both reason and unreason together, and the dynamic interplay between the two.

Lest this go under the name of dialectics, we must remember that this interplay can admit of no resolution, no sublation -- for fear that this too become a bad, totalizing action.

Instead, from the apophatic point of view, a preservation of the vital tension is desired, a “third-way” between these extremes. This need for preserving a vital tension between reason and its other resonates with the tradition of neo-conservatism. Notably, Leo Strauss’ critique of Spinoza insisted upon preserving, and never resolving, the contradiction between “orthodox faith” and reason, the respective legacies of ancient Jerusalem and Athens. To solve this tension would be both indecent and dangerous -- ushering in a totalitarian world order (which he identified as World Communism). The third-way, proposed by neo-conservatism, has since been that of a humbled and chastised reason -- modeled after antiquity rather than the modern Enlightenment.

At the risk of sounding vulgar, such a third-way “solution” is nothing other than positing a “chegg.” (As in, What came first, the chicken or the egg? Chegg!) This is not a true synthesis of concepts, but a pasting together of irreconcilables.

Where antinomies, by their nature, cannot be resolved, those that want to get on with the business of activism and politics will opt for this sort of theoretical expedient. It does

not solve the fundamental dualism, but only acts as a temporary placeholder, a fig leaf, to cover the incoherence.

Such hybrid concepts (“cheggs”) can be found throughout Miéville’s essay, from “possible-being,” and “processually-open,” to “hyper-phatism.” To this we may add “proud-humility,” “hope against hope,” and an inverted prometheanism of “unsaying.” But these only reveal the depths of apophatic dualism. There is always an extreme outside, an unfathomable abyss, which must be celebrated or flirted with, or else inspire fear in us homo sapiens, hunkered around our small fires.

This metaphysics of the beyond is an inversion H.P. Lovecraft’s dark conservatism. As Lovecraft writes in *The Call of Cthulhu*: “We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.”

Miéville, instead, invites us to bravely venture into this beyond; but for all that, what lies “out there” is no less mysterious. In other words, the dualism between a banal world and a fantastical beyond remains intact.

The difference between Miéville and Lovecraft is not one of metaphysics, but rather of opinion, tone, and feeling. But socialism must be founded on something more than an *esprit de corps* or common affect. It is rather the human faculty of reason which bridges the gulf between peoples, allows for collective action, and the common appreciation of our global condition. It is universal reason which points the way beyond our current degradations and overturns false consciousness wherever it is found.

As Mary Wollstonecraft put it, we should only bow before “the authority of reason, instead of being the modest slaves of opinion.”

Thus concludes our Syllabus of Errors; A proper Cataphatic Catechism to follow.

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Response

by China Miéville

I’m grateful to Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim for their engagement. I will keep this counterresponse brief, to focus on what I think are the key issues. (Interested readers can return to my piece in the light of this exchange to judge, more generally, whether I hold many of the positions they impute to me, and whether the criticisms thereof hit the mark.)

I am inspired by the radical Enlightenment tradition, so it’s no surprise that I am with Fluss and Frim on many claims: ‘knowledge is fundamental to politics’, for example; ‘[i]n

understanding capitalism, we can diagnose ... confusions, and compare them to a more adequate way of thinking'; 'very bad things are intelligible'; and, vis-à-vis socialism, 'we can get there from here'. I hold that Fluss and Frim are wrong to imply (at minimum) that the logic of my position should lead me to disagree.

Fundamental to their critique are two binaristic claims that I do contest. The first, though they acknowledge that my argument is precisely to the contrary, is that we must 'choose between' the apophatic and cataphatic. That there is an either/or. That is a function of a second underlying dualism, discernible in their slogan, 'Reason must be totalizing, or else the game is lost', and throughout.

For Fluss and Frim, 'irrationalism', which is to be opposed, is the *only* 'other' of something called 'rationalism'. But the sole mentions of 'irrationalism' in my piece (there are two, as opposed to seven in their much shorter response) are also criticisms of the phenomenon. When Fluss and Frim describe the 'irrational' as 'semantically parsed' by me as 'non-rational', they are in fact off-handedly eliding (and implying that I elide) what are in my piece (drawing particularly on Rudolf Otto) two explicitly counterposed categories. One of these is the object and engine of analysis; the other, I, too, abjure.

Of course, Fluss and Frim can reject this alternative non-binary model of consciousness and agency, for which the non-rational is integral, and distinct not only from the rational but from the irrational (the boundaries and relations between the three to be established). But not engaging with it at all, despite its key role in my argument, and merely asserting their own dyadic model, means the bulk of their attack is on a straw person. 'There is', they insist, 'no "third way" between rationalism and irrationalism', as if I argue otherwise. Rightly or wrongly, in my piece 'non-rationalism' is not an equivocation between two poles. They are right that '[t]he apophatic Marxist, being a Marxist, wants to resist the implication that a politics beyond reason is simply irrational', but they ignore the – preliminary and tentative, certainly – attempts to give evidence for that and flesh it out.

Their asserted counterposition, that outwith the 'rational' can only be the irrational, is, here at least, a faith position.

A series of reductive binaries follow, according to which a social phenomenon must be 'intelligible', *or* it would 'incomprehensible'. Given this radical dualism, any understanding at all implies total understandability, that there can be nothing relevant beyond understanding *tout court*. They argue, for example, that war 'can be *adequately* conceptualised' – emphasis mine – and thus cannot be 'incomprehensible', which I do not claim. That politics is possible if we 'know *something* of human flourishing' – emphasis mine – as if an apophatic analysis should not insist that precisely in knowing 'something of' it, we might know that we cannot know it all.

Because here is the rub: what Fluss and Frim insist is non-'incomprehensible', knowable, they repeatedly call 'reality' – and have the word do a lot of heavy lifting. But, certainly for a non-theist political analysis, and rendering rather beside the point their

deployment of Hegel against Kant and a 'noumenal way of thinking', the level of 'reality' key to the discussion here is political, precisely one of human agency, consciousness and subjectivity. The model of which is implicit in Fluss and Frim's critique is, to me at least, unconvincing and partial, leaving as it seems to no room for the complexity and political salience of drives and desires.

Allow, for example, that war might indeed be 'adequately conceptualized' in terms of analysing the socio-economic drivers behind a conflict. Does that imply that the libraries-worth of poetry and prose, the galleries-worth of art by combatants straining at the limits of language and symbols to express the truth, the enormity, the *reality*, of their experiences, are supererogatory to subjectivity? Pointless? Politically irrelevant? Irrational?

Conversely, it is a long-standing socialist slogan that what we want and deserve is bread and roses. If we are hungry, the bread is simple enough to understand. But what of the other? Do Fluss and Frim, like the rest of us, want roses with their bread? Is that a 'rational' demand? A meaningless epiphenomenon? A regrettable irrationalism, even, to be swept away by the majesty of cataphasis?

Or might there be a non-irrational surplus to that real yearning that no amount of 'rationalism' can parse?

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'Apophatic thinking risks paralysis', Fluss and Frim say, and for some articulations that may be true. But we do not judge hermeneutics by what their worst applications might enable, but by whether they elucidate at their best. After all, the history of cataphatic politics, predicated on certainty and the total parsability of political subjects, is hardly unsullied by vulgarities, technocratic thinking, paralysis and reaction, and that is no reason to dispense with reason.

There is a second obverse to their concern, too. Co-linked hyperphatically with rationalism, to be sure, an apophatic politics that we deserve might, far from paralysing, inspire. Our martyrs, after all, fought and died for roses as well as for bread.