

# A Party of Latecomers

Francis Mulhern

July/Aug 2001

# Contents

Setting out . . . . .	3
Continuing . . . . .	8
The revolt of the elite . . . . .	11
The elite and the 99 per cent . . . . .	12
After OWS . . . . .	15
Who is n+1? . . . . .	18
Arriving late . . . . .	19
Beyond Kulturkritik and Cultural Studies . . . . .	20
The fortunes of politics . . . . .	21

A magazine, if it is not doctrinaire, should have a character rather than a programme—so wrote Roberto Schwarz in 1967, launching a new publishing initiative for the left in Brazil. His preferred comparison was ‘a good essay’, something both surefooted and unexpected, clearing an uncertain path by the light of interest and strict reasoning, and certainly not without guiding convictions.<sup>1</sup> Recall of this prospectus is prompted by the record of the New York-based *n+1*, which has now completed ten years of publication as a magazine devoted, in its own phrasing, to ‘literature, culture and politics’, establishing itself in that time as a distinctive presence on the intellectual left, in the United States and beyond. Convention alone suggests that this is a good time to make a provisional assessment of the project—or more aptly perhaps, to appraise its ‘character’.

An outline description of the practical ensemble called *n+1* gives a first indication of the unfolding scope and spirit of the undertaking and at the same time suggests the necessary modesty of a small-scale account of it. The magazine itself is dual-platform, combining a print publication that has so far seen more than twenty book-length issues, and an online supplement that expands and also diversifies editorial capacity, creating space for special subject streams, accommodating shorter or more time-sensitive contributions, and in all ways enhancing the ability to manoeuvre. *n+1* has spun out a book series under the same name, some but not all of the material originating in its pages, and also publishes a sister magazine, *Paper Monument*, devoted to contemporary art. These print and online manifestations take on immediate, face-to-face form in occasional panel discussions, public launch parties and other convivial events<sup>2</sup>—all this miniaturized, as it were, if only for a time, in a Tumblr-based personal ads service. More than a publication, *n+1* is a micro-culture, a whole way of intellectual life.

For all that, the magazine, including its online supplement, amounting to an archive of texts in the high hundreds, will be the main reference in what follows. More programmatic ventures, being more tightly focused and (inevitably) more repetitious, offer interpretive economies. Here, the case is otherwise: in *n+1*, the essay has been foremost, and even paradigmatic, with all that implies of mobility and surprise—and for a reader, the counterpart risks of reductive generalization.

## Setting out

However, ‘programmatic’ is not the last word that comes to mind in a survey of *n+1*’s first six or seven numbers, which appeared over the four years from summer 2004 to fall 2008. The inaugural issue struck an immediately combative note. ‘Negations’ was its headline theme and it opened with a statement of disaffection: if not quite a manifesto then a warning of mutiny.

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Apresentação’, *Teoria e Prática*, 1, 1967; reprinted in *Praga: Revista de Estudos Marxistas*, 1, 1996, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> The magazine’s website advertised a dozen events for the year to May 2015.

We are living in an era of demented self-censorship. The old private matters—the functions of the body, the chase after love and money, the unhappiness of the family—are now the commonest stuff of public life . . . But try saying that the act we call ‘war’ would more properly be termed a massacre, and that the state we call ‘occupation’ would more properly be termed a war; that the conspiracy theories, here and abroad, which have not yet been proved true by Seymour Hersh or the General Accounting Office are probably, nonetheless, true; or that the political freedoms so cherished and, really, so necessary, are also the mask of a more pervasive, insidious repression—try saying all this, or any of it, and see how far you get. Then try saying it in a complex way, at some length, expressing as you do so an actual human personality.

We are living in a time when Nabokov and Henry James are read in Tehran but we have pornography and publicity at home . . . In the future, it will be seen as the time when some of the best people in our intellectual class gave their ‘critical support’ to a hubristic, suicidal adventure in Iraq.

The problem is hardly a lack of magazines, even literary magazines. Culture can expand now to fill the superstore. But civilization is the dream of advance—to find the new, or take what we know from the past and say it with the care that only the living can claim. ‘One must have been in exile and in the wilds to appreciate a new periodical’, said Alexander Herzen, founder of the mighty *Bell*. Perhaps you live in the city or the town, and in the safety of your own country. But you have known the exile, and are acquainted with the wilds.<sup>3</sup>

The grounds of disaffection were both literary and political, and pervasively cultural. As one of the founding editors, Marco Roth, put it, in the Letters column that soon became a standing feature of the magazine:

At a time when Americans seemed to have lost faith in both progressive politics and the possibility of individual improvement, in literature and thought, without the aid of capitalism . . . we chose  $n+1$  as the working title of our journal. For us it was a metaphor for the possibility of progress, the infinitely open set . . .<sup>4</sup>

If these terms of diagnosis had an old-fashioned ring, they were not to be mistaken for signs of fogeyism. They were one illustration of a commitment to a change of intellectual ethos, a move beyond the compulsive, enfeebling ironism of the postmodern

---

<sup>3</sup> ‘Editorial Statement’, *n+1*, 1: *Negations*, summer 2004. Subsequent first references follow this form but omit the title of the magazine. Repeat references are abbreviated as appropriate.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Letters: ‘ $(n+1)$ x2’, 5: *Decivilizing Process*, winter 2007. Roth was replying to an editor of an Italian Marxist journal of longer standing called *n+1*.

1990s. Or in the words of Roth's co-founder Keith Gessen, as he signed off the launch issue with a renewed address to the reader: 'There are better ways to embarrass yourself. It is time to say what you mean.'<sup>5</sup>

Of the twenty-two items that made up the first issue, more than two-thirds were written by five founding editors, either under their own names or in their collective capacity.<sup>6</sup> These included, most strikingly, Mark Greif's 'Against Exercise', a sustained critical examination of the culture of gym and jogging in its symptomatic relations with capitalist work technologies—the first in a long series of critiques of everyday life at the millennium and since. Revulsion at the Anglo-us invasion of Iraq was pronounced in the magazine at this time, and Greif contributed a further two essays prompted by it, one a study in contemporary war-making ending with a call for the moral self-revaluation, the process of 'public self-discovery' that the war should properly bring in its wake;<sup>7</sup> the other an exercise in the high prophetic manner on the subject of the abuses of Abu Ghraib and their source in the cultural pathologies of the homeland:

Because of the way we live, the American mind fills up with the sexual use of other people. Even on the subway and in the street, porn-i-color daydreams issue through our mental viewfinders . . . You can escape our bombing maybe, but you can't escape our fun.<sup>8</sup>

Greif's essay on warfare, with its unabashed interpretive dependence on the Homeric prototype of heroic combat, was one earnest of the attempt to open lines of communication between literary and political values. Benjamin Kunkel offered a second approach in 'Horse Mountain', a story in which an old man reflects on the manifold frictions of a long and strong but difficult marriage, with its recurring clashes over religion and Palestinian rights, but also on the ambiguities of his own contemplative righteousness—political commitment without entailments, judgements without reparative action. The Middle East crisis returned in the unlikely form of a proposal from Greif and Roth for the incorporation of the West Bank and Gaza as the fifty-first state of the Union.<sup>9</sup> Cool and clever in its exposition, this, as Roth explained to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* years later, was a piece of 'political surrealism' written in mock-conformity with the conventional demand to take a position on the question.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> 'End-notes', 1.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Gessen, Mark Greif, Chad Harbach, Benjamin Kunkel and Marco Roth. The sixth founder was Allison Lorentzen. This was a male-heavy line-up, with a first contents page to match. Women's presence in the magazine grew steadily in the next few years, as did the imprint of sexual politics—which had been evident in its critical repertoire from the beginning. Editorial restructuring in 2012 rejuvenated the core group and rebalanced its gender ratio. (13: *Awkward Age*, summer 2012).

<sup>7</sup> 'Mogadishu, Baghdad, Troy', 1.

<sup>8</sup> 'A Bunch of Nobodies', 1.

<sup>9</sup> 'Palestine, the 51st State', 1.

<sup>10</sup> Cit. Ariel Krill, 'Take a page from this: how one magazine reinvigorated American intellectual life', *Haaretz*, 28 September 2013.

In truth not inclined to make any political statement—‘what could we say that hadn’t already been said at that point?’—the authors tendered a literary simulacrum.

In the general field of literary and cultural criticism, on the other hand, the appetite for concerted intervention was immediately evident. Under the heading ‘The Intellectual Situation’, *n+1* opened a ‘Diary’, a record of critical encounters and engagements giving body to the Sartrean suggestion of the rubric, in which ‘The Editors’ collectively traversed the institutions, forms and practices of the old and new media, beginning with three centres of literary-cultural evaluation: the long-established *New Republic*; the new literary pacemakers flocking around Dave Eggers’s *McSweeney’s* magazine and its offspring the *Believer*; and the neo-conservative *Weekly Standard*.<sup>11</sup>

Written in a rapid, unbuttoned, aphoristic prose, these polemics were ‘negations’ by which to capture something of the positive characteristics of properly critical thought. In the books pages of *The New Republic*, the editors of *n+1* perceived a degeneration of normative discourse on literature (the historic ‘defence of standards’) into ‘a new vulgarity’. Taste was now confused with ‘sniffing out the tasteless’, as judgement hardened into censoriousness. Authority, fetishized as ‘intelligence’, was taking the place of thought:

The moral responsibility is not to be intelligent. It’s to *think*. An attribute, self-satisfied and fixed, gets confused with an action, thinking, which revalues old ideas as well as defends them. Thought adds something new to the world; simple intelligence wields hardened truth like a bludgeon.<sup>12</sup>

The case of *McSweeney’s* and the *Believer* was quite the opposite. That the ‘Eggersards’ were in important respects an avant-garde phenomenon *n+1* was ready to grant. Their leader, the author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, had a proven flair for ‘creating institutions of a less elitist literary culture’, and if his ‘movement’ should prove capable of restarting ‘the engine of literary innovation and strife’, then it would have ‘performed a real historic service’. But this seemed unlikely: the peculiarity of avant-gardism Eggers-style was its regressive impulse, a return ‘to the claims of childhood’: ‘Transcendence would not figure in [Eggersard] thought. Intellect did not interest them, but kids did.’ In keeping with this, the reappropriation in *McSweeney’s* of the design and tonal departures of earlier periods went on unburdened by the concern for truth that had been their historic point. The *Believer* would later be launched as the main vehicle of the Eggersards, taking forward ‘their version of thinking—as an antidote to mainstream criticism, which they call snarkiness.’ But ‘mere belief is hostile to the whole idea of thinking.’ The magazine’s series of philosophical profiles ‘confused philosophers with white-haired dispensers of truth. That is not a thinker: that’s Santa Claus.’<sup>13</sup> Supervised in the name of a petrified authority

---

<sup>11</sup> Founded, respectively, 1914; 1998 and 2003; 1995.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Designated Haters’, 1.

<sup>13</sup> ‘A Regressive Avant-Garde’, 1.

or sentimentalized and swaddled to the point of inanity, either way literary culture risked estrangement from the necessary freedoms and disciplines of critical thought.

To these twin cautions, the ‘pomo neo-cons’ of the *Weekly Standard* added a third, of a different kind. Now the danger was not the mock-critical posture of an authoritarian liberalism or the faux-democratic enthusiasms of the Eggersards but the complacency of the left in a time of regular intellectual cross-dressing on the hard right. The *Standard* was ‘a parallel universe’ with the emphasis precisely on the parallel, not the otherness. An article celebrating Mickey Mouse as the great American optimist borrows its procedural inspiration from the *marxisant* “‘cultstuds” . . . now available at a discount in most universities’. Another repurposes Foucauldian themes to describe and lament the coming discursive exclusion of those for whom ‘gay marriage’ is a contradiction in terms—the ordinary guy who believes in ‘Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’, the truly oppressed of his time. Such are the ‘advanced methods’ that ‘too many of us with left-wing prejudices’ thought sufficient to ‘change the world’. Their successful reappropriation by the right was proof that ‘learning to think strategically about symbolic forms doesn’t necessitate any particular substantive politics.’ Indeed, they had been requisitioned for a strategy that allows ‘those from elite backgrounds to pretend to speak like the philistine middle class’. The culturalization of political discourse had long been a key stratagem of the right.<sup>14</sup>

*n+1*’s approach to popular culture was different. The last of the launch editorials turned from writing to sport and from intuitions of value to strict measurement, noting and reflecting on the relentless increase in the average height and weight of professional basketball and baseball players, to the point where the games themselves were altered and compromised. ‘Forget the fact that the basket is too low, no longer commensurate with our capacity for jumping; there’s not even space on the court to accommodate all the bodies.’ At once knowledgeable and unsparing in the way of true fans, the editors offered the most general conclusions, which were not of the kind to flatter the ordinary guy:

As the athletes became less human, they could also have become less meaningful. Instead, the entire culture has bulked up, and the American male body has become, in effect, a miniature version of the economy—for each, ‘health’ has come to be defined by accelerating rates of production and consumption, regardless of the long-term effects . . . So perhaps it doesn’t matter how absurdly huge our athletes become; they are fungible commodities that can be broken down into numbers and swapped accordingly.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> ‘PoMo NeoCons’, 1.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Human, Not Too Human’, 1.

## Continuing

The subject that spoke in this passage was the formative presence in the new magazine. It was given to hybridation and modal displacement as procedures of writing and critical resources. Thus the editorials that have been so important a part of the contents are not ‘editorials’ but a self-styled ‘Diary’, which in this case—the first of many such—turns out to consist of four short essays presented as way-stations in the picaresque narrative of a cultural starveling—a small, unresolved fable of arid times. The scope of reviewing is similarly reimagined. In Nicholas Dames’s hands, the usual novel round-up has become a form of genre study.<sup>16</sup> What looks, to start with, like a very late review of the movie *Avatar* develops into a sustained critical-historical discussion of stereoscopic art, with a range of reference extending from Baudelaire to Werner Herzog.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, framing decisions can be playful and at times perverse. Lawrence Jackson’s ‘Slickheads’ tells a story (his own) of growing up black in north-west Baltimore, in a text that is easily taken for fiction although framed as an ‘essay’—and might well be taken so, with some reason, were it presented cold.<sup>18</sup> Kristin Dombek’s ‘How to Quit’ is another ‘essay’ that might be a fiction, this one centrally focused on the addictive appeal of the addicted, and tagged ‘Money and Power’ and ‘Urban Planning’. More recent essays by her form a serio-comic advice column, in which her fictional agony aunt writes a sequence of what might be—what?—short essays, now tagged ‘My Life and Times’.<sup>19</sup> Redolent of the postmodern years, no doubt, such tactics are better viewed, overall, in the perspective of two other features of *n+1* that were visible here, a strong attachment to critical cultural theory (of differing kinds) and unbending resistance to the logic of the market: they have been part of a general effort to renew the reach of the literary, in conditions where, as its founders believed, ‘literature was being increasingly marginalized, particularly by the people who were doing it.’<sup>20</sup>

In the same way, however, attachment to ‘theory’ was now not quite what it had been in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Then, thanks to the dual abdication of philosophy and the novel, European theory had been taken up as the only available means by which to think the crises that harrowed us culture and society from the late sixties onwards. Theory was now ‘dead’, the editors declared: inevitably, since it had been an import culture that could not long survive the actual deaths of its great exponents. ‘But the big mistake right now would be to fail to keep faith with

---

<sup>16</sup> See his ‘The Theory Generation’, 14: *The Awkward Age*, summer 2012, and ‘Seventies Throwback Fiction’, 21: *Throwback*, winter 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Moira Weigel, ‘Cinema of Disillusionment’, 14.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Slickheads’, 15: *Amnesty*, winter 2013.

<sup>19</sup> ‘How to Quit’, 15; see also ‘The Help Desk’, 19: *Real Estate*, spring 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Krill, ‘Take a page from this’, *Haaretz*. See Gessen’s long account of Dave Eggers’s tireless and increasingly manipulative self-marketing, also in the first issue. His lens, appropriately, was the activity of Gary Baum, the teenage creator of *FoE!Log*, perhaps the most disobliging fan initiative a self-made celebrity ever had to cope with. (‘Eggers, Teen Idol’, 1. *FoE* is an acronym for ‘Friends of Eggers’.)



what theory once meant to us’—not all the sometime critics of the sign now worked in advertising. ‘. . . An opening has emerged, in the novel and in intellect. What to do with it?’<sup>21</sup> In respect of the novel, that question remained, for now, a gesture, notwithstanding a passing salute to Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*, hailed by the editors as ‘a monumental renewal of the critical social novel’, the thinking novel of life after theory.<sup>22</sup> The sheer miscellaneity of the short fiction published in *n+1* and its uncertain priority in the editorial scheme—for all the pervasive literariness of the magazine—did not encourage strong inferences. The role of ‘intellect’, in contrast, had already been signalled, and quickly materialized in a steady, versatile flow of cultural criticism. Inflected sometimes towards a Foucauldian ontology of the present, sometimes towards Bourdieusian constructions of the literary field, often recalling the Adorno of *Minima Moralia*, though usually with a dash of mockery to enliven his gallows humour, this has been the central practice and distinction of *n+1*.

It went without saying that the institutions and practices of the literary and wider journalistic culture would be first in line for critical assessment. The editorials against *The New Republic* and the *Believer* were opening shots, to be followed by a report from inside the *Wall Street Journal*, mordant commentaries on the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s*, for their obdurate sexism, and—hilariously—the *Paris Review*, ‘for disproving the prejudice that blurb-writing can’t extend over thousands of words’.<sup>23</sup> Core issues and practices of book culture were appraised one after another. The panic over a supposed ‘reading crisis’ was denounced as a ‘con’ reducing reading itself to a shallow bookstore ‘event’ and serving to discourage and invalidate the free and responsible exercise of critical judgement.<sup>24</sup> The function of book reviewing was assessed for reconstruction, public readings for abolition.<sup>25</sup> The New York Review’s Classics library—‘a cosmopolitan minor literature’—prompted a broad reflective survey of the role of book series in canon-formation, while a companion piece explored the functioning of ‘the hype cycle’ as ‘the emotional life of capitalism, an internalized stock market of aesthetic calls and puts [testifying] to the power and then, almost as soon, to the impotence of mere culture’.<sup>26</sup> In a landmark piece subsequently developed as an *n+1* book, Chad Harbach discussed the ubiquitous and widely deprecated university writing programme in its imagined and real relations with the other world of New York publishing. Himself an alumnus of ‘the Programme’ and a novelist then only months away from a best-selling New York debut, Harbach profiled the contrasting ecologies

---

<sup>21</sup> ‘The Editors, ‘Theory: Death Is Not the End’, 2: *Happiness*, winter 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Compare Nicholas Dames, reviewing a wave of ‘Theory-wise’ novels (six and more in two years) and modifying Henry James’s advice for the present: ‘Forget the hermeneutics of suspicion. Remember what you’ve suspected all along—what, looking around you, you can hardly avoid suspecting. Be one of those on whom nothing, not even Theory, is lost.’ (‘The Theory Generation’, 14.)

<sup>23</sup> Philip Connors, ‘My Life and Times in American Journalism’, 4: *Reconstruction*, spring 2005; The Editors, ‘The Intellectual Situation’, 15.

<sup>24</sup> The Editors, ‘The Reading Crisis’, 3: *Reality Principle*, fall 2005.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Book Review Nation’, 6: *Mainstream*, winter 2008; ‘Literary Readings: Cancel Them’, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Respectively, ‘The Hype Cycle’, and ‘The Spirit of Revival’, 6.

of the two systems, their respective economic states—the academic flourishing, the commercial nervy and embattled—and divergent canonical priorities, the short story versus the big novel. Stock polarizations of the two were mistaken, he maintained: the illusions and introversion of the burgeoning university writing culture were no less a hazard than the middle-brow pressures of Manhattan publishing.<sup>27</sup>

The greatest challenge to the familiar book world came with the electronic re-equipping of retail and the creation of new computerized systems for writing and publishing, in a period of ascendant neo-liberalism. Between the arrival of the World Wide Web and Amazon in the early 1990s and the advent of personal e-reading hardware and the new social media a decade and a half later, every aspect of book and periodical publishing came under notice of more or less radical restructuring. The gestation of *n+1* belongs to this period and was in part conditioned by it. One characterization of the project—Greif’s—suggested an ark of sorts, ‘a long print archive in an era of the short sound bite’.<sup>28</sup> This was apt in its way, but conveyed little of the energy with which the editors would appraise the emergent forms, practices and ethos of the new communication technologies.

The winter 2007 number, headlined ‘Decivilizing Process’, devoted its Diary to email, cell phones and blogging. These editorials are beyond simple paraphrase in their literariness, and compellingly—impractically—quotable. They range in attitude from high-minded disbelief to knowing desolation. The point about these critics is that they are intimate with the degradations they lament. The rhetorical manner rises to the high epigrammatic—

Alexander [the Great] started the silent era of the West; Nokia will finish it.

—digresses into the learned fanciful—

The email, like the Petrarchan sonnet, is properly a seduction device . . .

—and modulates at times into a rapid, button-holing style of address we might call Stand-Up:

When writing first developed, ancient philosophers feared it would destroy human memory; to write anything down was to put yourself in the position of that guy in the movie *Memento*. And this wasn’t totally wrong. Also, letters: they had a funny way of getting lost or opened by the wrong people.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> ‘mfa vs nyc’, 10: *Self-Improvement*, fall 2010. Originally signed ‘The Editors’, this became the opening text in a book edited by Harbach: *mfa vs nyc: The Two Cultures of American Fiction*, New York, 2014. mfa stands for Master of Fine Arts. In 1975, Harbach reported, there were 79 such programmes in the United States; by 2010 the number had risen to 854.

<sup>28</sup> Reported by Susan Hodara, ‘Intellectual Entrepreneurs’, *Harvard Magazine*, January–February 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Respectively, ‘Whatever Minutes’, ‘Against Email’ and ‘The Blog Reflex’, 5. Alexander’s soldiers are said to have marvelled at his ability to read silently.

And so on. But through all the spirited play there is a steady vision of history progressing by its bad side. Email is an epitome of uncontrollable, unusable overproduction. Blogging is, for the most part, a travesty of the more democratic public sphere the development of the weblog seemed to promise. Cellphone use nurtures a public behaviour compelling you to talk to someone, anyone, but not the person sitting beside you. Except in emergencies, these debased tendencies prevail. ‘The benevolent uses of the phone, the internet, the weblog, email, and so forth, ride like bits of cork on a great tide of waste’, a ‘decivilizing process’ that ‘will undo our thoughts, our speech, our fantasies. That’s an emergency, too. Only who do you call about it?’<sup>30</sup>

## The revolt of the elite

The acknowledgement of those bits of cork was more than a rhetorical concession of the familiar kind. At times, indeed, dialectic ingenuity could pass over into wishfulness, as it did a few years later, when Twitter, deplored by some for its intensive cultivation of narcissistic nullity, was salvaged as the new antidote to ‘bloggorrhea’, revaluing the classical literary values of ‘terseness and impersonality’ in a time of pandemic slackness and self-indulgence. But the more usual emphasis was that struck by Roth, when he denounced

the faux-democratic, but really ‘mass-cult’ effects of blogging which have reduced news to gossip, critique to fandom, and transmuted taste into mere regional and class preferences.<sup>31</sup>

Such prose was vulnerable to the charge of ‘elitism’, not least in a magazine so kill-joy that it could turn even a simple tweet into a high-cultural mission. And as the editors perceived, the currency of the charge was a topic in itself, not to be reduced to a description that might or might not be accurate. Their ‘Revolt of the Elites’ was a piece of reverse engineering designed to elucidate the problem to which the populist commonplace of ‘elitism’ was a solution of a kind. In its given form, this was already the work of a displacement from politics to culture, in which the most powerful agencies of state and society—once, but no longer, dubbed ‘the power elite’—were always-already above suspicion. College education was a central means of collective self-reproduction for America’s monied classes and only secondarily an egalitarian resource; but even so it was not a general marker of ‘elite’ membership. That distinction was generally reserved for highly educated individuals—very often but not invariably formed in a privileged liberal-arts environment—who appeared indifferent to the ‘money-making mandate’ that ‘real Americans’ were supposed to fulfil, whether by succeeding or in failing by the book.

---

<sup>30</sup> ‘Decivilizing Process’, 5. The allusion in the title is to Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (1939).

<sup>31</sup> Respectively, The Editors, ‘Please rt’, 14; and online only, Roth, ‘Blog Bound’, 29 October 2009.

These compatriots were instinctive Bourdieusians, *n+1* argued, convinced that displays of cultural distinction were no more than badges of class identity: refusing such bad faith, real Americans admitted their real, shared preferences. However, there was an alternative anthropology of moral difference, which the editors upheld as an attainable, though distant, standard: this was José Ortega y Gasset's inter-war classic, *The Revolt of the Masses*. 'The beautiful blindness of Ortega's analysis', as they understood it, 'was to ignore social distinctions in favour of existential differentiations. Aristocratic and mass man were . . . not social categories at all but separate dispositions.'<sup>32</sup>

This was a naïve reading of a rhetorical sublimation that has been commonplace in the high tradition of cultural criticism for two centuries or more.<sup>33</sup> But credulity here enabled a strange misprision, such that Ortega's aristocrats became those who are 'superior' to others only by virtue of believing themselves inferior to what they are capable of becoming. '*Self-improvement*, for all that it smacks of the self-help shelf at Barnes & Noble'—and much else that Don José and like-minded thinkers despised—

is also, in this way, the rallying cry of the only kind of elite worth having.

Language use is the ground on which the issue is most tensely staged, for there, in 'the verbosphere', the contradiction between universal capability and minority competence is played out all the time. So it is that 'educated speech and egalitarian ideas', above all when combined, provoke the most powerful 'anti-elitist' reactions. They are reminders that things could be otherwise and better. '*The struggle for equality isn't over, we still have a cultural elite.*' In this perfectly ambiguous construction, *n+1* countered the reactionary populism of the right, literally word for word, by raising the standard of a responsible critical left.<sup>34</sup>

## The elite and the 99 per cent

This was the most concentrated stream of critical engagement in *n+1*'s first years. There was nothing comparable to show for politics. Coming into being at the time of George W. Bush's re-election, the magazine not surprisingly gave space to the man himself, the stifling discourse of the two-party political order that nurtured him and the voting arrangements that helped him home—mixed mockery and yearning in three

---

<sup>32</sup> 'Revolt of the Elites', 10.

<sup>33</sup> In fact, this gambit was an instance of the culturalist displacement of politics that the editors began by challenging. Ortega's theme was the overrunning of 'liberal democracy'—by which he meant a system in which rival elites competed for the votes of the electorate—by 'hyper-democracy', in which the popular classes claimed the right to active political participation: José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), New York 1932.

<sup>34</sup> The editors went on to unpack their point: 'This could mean either that the lingering existence of a cultural elite testifies to the persistence of class privilege—or else that today the cultural elite is the only thing standing between us and the full spectrum dominance of the power elite. Both notions are true, but the latter truth has gone unadvertised.' (10)

articles signed by individual editors.<sup>35</sup> Abroad, along with Palestine and Iraq, Bolivia, India and South Africa featured under the rubric of politics.<sup>36</sup> Fundamental matters of policy such as the oil economy and global warming were discussed. Yet for all the varied interest of individual items, this was a miscellany, in which the clear purpose of politicizing cultural analysis was matched by a less well-defined aspiration to bring literature in the broad sense into fertile communication with politics. Amidst all this, Mark Greif pointed towards a distinctive order of political engagement in his essay on ‘Gut-Level Legislation, or Redistribution’, in which he dismissed the pseudo-responsible posturing of commentators, maintaining ‘that politics could be served by thinking about problems and principles, rather than rehearsing strategy’—a notion that ‘leaves them not so much bemused as furious’. The corresponding practice he approved would be ‘political surrealism’, or

asking for what is at present impossible, in order to get at last, by indirection or implausible directness, the principles that would underlie the world we’d want rather than the one we have.<sup>37</sup>

As things turned out, opportunities came soon enough.

Looking back from late 2005 to the years around the turn of the century and the drama of boom and bust in the dot-com economy, the editors had dwelt on the generational subjectivity of the time, speaking of the ‘mortgaged ease’ of their contemporaries—a typically culturalist inflection. By then, a far greater crisis was already beginning. Within months, the us housing market bubble burst, detonating the liquidity crisis of 2007–8 that led to the deepest international recession since the 1930s. Soon, as Gessen later reported, they felt they were ‘increasingly turning into a group of autodidact economists’.<sup>38</sup> An interview with David Harvey, carried in the fall of 2008, was synoptic and illuminating. However another feature, begun at the same time and continuing for three years, was more in the house style of the unexpected: a free-ranging tutorial with an unnamed Manhattan hedge fund manager. Beginning with mortgages and the arcana of speculative finance, the series ran to seven interviews and extended to commentary on the worsening crisis of the global financial order and the subjectivity of denial so widespread at every level.<sup>39</sup> The next issue of the magazine,

---

<sup>35</sup> Respectively, Mark Greif, ‘W.’, 1; Benjamin Kunkel, ‘Shhh . . . Swing Voters Are Listening’, 2; Marco Roth, ‘Lower the Voting Age!’, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Alarcón, ‘Note from La Paz’, 4; Johannes Türk, ‘The Trouble with Being German’, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Greif, ‘Gut-Level Legislation, or Redistribution’, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Interviewed by Sofia Groopman, ‘Keith Gessen and Diary of a Very Bad Year’, *The Daily* (blog of *The Paris Review*), 3 August 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Keith Gessen, ‘Anonymous Hedge Fund Manager’, published as three separate items, transcripts of three meetings in the twelve months beginning summer 2007, appeared in 7: *Correction*, fall 2008. A fourth part appeared in the next issue, as ‘Conversations with hfm, December 2008–July 2009’ (8: *Recessional*, fall 2009). The interviews appeared in book form, as *Diary of a Very Bad Year: Confessions of an Anonymous Hedge Fund Manager* (2010). See also, online, ‘Who Spent the Money’, 21 June 2010; and ‘hfm Redux’, in two parts, 15–16 December 2010.

headlined ‘Recessional’, called for the development of ‘a red and green Marxism as the way out of the crisis’.<sup>40</sup>

Kunkel’s article on full (that is, *full*) employment and Christopher Glazek’s passionate arguments for the abolition of the us prison system—even at the cost of an increased rate of death sentencing—were examples of Greif’s calculated impossibilism.<sup>41</sup> By late 2011, when Glazek’s essay appeared, such flights of political imagining had found a tangible, activist context, in the Occupy Wall Street campaign and associated initiatives across America. *n+1*’s first institutional response was the launch of *Occupy!*, a crowd-funded ‘irregular tabloid’ gazette published online and in print, from and for the militants of Zuccotti Park and beyond.<sup>42</sup> Editors of the magazine made individual contributions to the debates, in *n+1* online or in the gazette. Roth’s ‘Letters of Resignation from the American Dream’ and Kunkel’s ‘The Politics of the Poor’, co-written with Charles Petersen for *Occupy!*, were early versions of the editorial statement that formed the core of the magazine’s main reflection on the ows experience, ‘A Left Populism’.<sup>43</sup>

Set between two personal narratives of uncertain documentary status, ‘A Left Populism’ took as its focus the celebrated slogan of Occupy, *We are the 99 per cent*. In this, the Editors wrote, there lay a challenge that could not simply be understood by analogies with the radical reforming movements of the middle and later twentieth century: it was ‘nothing less than to build a [political force] capable of rescuing the country in the name of the people by and for whom it’s allegedly governed’, or ‘the *active recreation* of American democracy’. The Occupiers had unveiled the features of a new social majority, insecure, under- or unemployed, over-educated, and ‘clinging precariously to an idea of middle-classness that seems more and more a chimera’. It could be that the testimony of the self-declared 99 per cent was no more than a record of defeat, were it not that their declarations had performative value, ‘actually creating class consciousness for themselves and those around them’. The visual style of that consciousness was captured in the image of the homeless—‘the vanguard of contemporary America’. To acknowledge this was to pose the difficult questions of social identification—for it was this, not sympathy, that the slogan demanded. The difficulty was one of personal culture and experience, to begin with, but there was also a fundamental issue of campaigning policy hidden away in the reassuringly simple arithmetic of the slogan. The idea that the income of the 1 per cent could be taxed to any great equalizing effect was an illusion. A far wider fiscal front would have to be

---

<sup>40</sup> 8; see in particular the editorials ‘On Your Marx’ and ‘Growth Outgrown’.

<sup>41</sup> Kunkel, ‘Full Employment’, 9: *Bad Money*, spring 10; Glazek, ‘Raise the Crime Rate’, 13: *Machine Politics*, winter 2012.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Read Our New Gazette’, *n+1* online announcement, 21 October 2011, a month after the first demonstration on 17 September. See also Emily Witt, ‘*n+1* Raises Funds for Occupy Wall Street-Inspired Gazette’, *New York Observer*, 20 October 2011. Four more issues appeared in 2011–12.

<sup>43</sup> Roth, online only, 24 October 2011; Kunkel and Petersen, *Occupy!* online, 31 October 2011; The Editors, ‘A Left Populism’, 13.

opened. But if, as reported in 2000, nearly two-fifths of Americans believed themselves to be either existing or prospective members of the 1 per cent, what were the chances for a redistributive programme attacking the net incomes of as much as 20 per cent of taxpayers? At the same time, however, openness to fundamental political reform was now greater than at any time in recent American history, and here the left might ‘begin to contemplate a return from the wilderness’. A new populism was in prospect, a ‘reconstitution of the American “people” as a progressive force bringing about a society that’s just, sustainable and free’.

The word *union* occurred just once in this editorial, and then in the grammatical negative: the new majority was, among other demoralizing things, ‘non-unionized’. But what organized labour might have to contribute to the new politics was left unexplored. In fact, trade unions were already contributing to the occupations in material ways, as Nikil Saval reported in a telling online companion piece, but on terms that he summarized in a wounding comparison: the occupiers viewed them in the same way the Democratic Party did, ‘as a source of bodies and money, a mere service that tends to be thanked and repudiated in the same breath’.<sup>44</sup> The historic value of ‘solidarity’ had been reduced to a matter of discretionary approval. ‘People can endlessly rehearse to themselves the failures of traditional trade unionism, or they can try to change the one available form of organization that promises to deliver the things they want.’ Movements normally take their names from what they are for or against, Saval noted, and

The ‘Occupy Movement’, which, when it lets its guard down, admits that it wants equality, might do worse than submitting to a name that represents the struggle for it in the past, and call itself a ‘labour movement’.

## After OWS

Occupy marked a high-point of direct political engagement for  $n+1$ . It was, the editors said,

the first serious political hope—not less serious for its fragility—that many of us have been able to entertain about our country in our few years or decades of adult life.<sup>45</sup>

Just who that ‘us’ encompassed, now as in other moments of high tension, was unclear. What did seem clear was that the engagement was not an uncomplicated embrace. Saval’s impatience with the stock anti-union animus on show among the

---

<sup>44</sup> Saval, online only, ‘A Labor Movement’, 17 November 2011. Saval, Petersen and Glazek were all associate editors of the magazine at this time.

<sup>45</sup> ‘A Left Populism’.

occupiers was evident—reaching an unforgettable high in his evocation of ‘start-up hackers skateboarding through picket lines’ in San Francisco.<sup>46</sup> (An account of the resistance to the union-busting state governor of Wisconsin had appeared in *n+1* earlier in the year.<sup>47</sup>) Kunkel, writing elsewhere, challenged Slavoj Žižek’s claim that for now the principal enemy was capitalism as such, and also expressed concern that traditional anarchist norms of unmediated, prefigurative practice might ‘stifle, rather than inspire’ the development of an adequate programme for the left.<sup>48</sup> The epiphanies of Zuccotti Park fell some way short of the political synthesis that the vision of a capable ‘left populism’ implied. The call—the editors’ own—to ‘occupy the future’ was stirring but also obscure.

The imprint of the financial crisis was more lasting and various. The writing in Kunkel’s *Utopia or Bust*, published in 2014 in association with the militant socialist *Jacobin* magazine, came after the collapse of Lehman Brothers—and for the greater part predated Occupy—and showed a wider concern with the patterns of the capitalist economy since the 1970s. 2011 saw the launch of ‘City by City’, a diverse series of reports, memoirs and analyses from bigger and smaller population centres around the us, attempting to capture the textures of everyday life at the exposed ends of economic crisis, in a necessary complement and contrast to the view from the Manhattan hedge funds or bohemian Brooklyn.<sup>49</sup> In another vein, the achievements of WalMart’s women workers in a long-running class action over equal pay prompted a reconsideration of the old notion of ‘sex class’.<sup>50</sup> Saval pursued his interest in workplace relations into his magazine’s home territory, publishing, organizing a symposium on ‘Labor and Letters’, including testimony from employees of the *New Yorker* and *Harper’s* but also the left monthly *Dissent*, and ending, fittingly, with a short, candid history of working conditions at *n+1* itself.<sup>51</sup> The politics and culture of race have continued to be a feature of the magazine, currently in a number whose special focus is police violence against black Americans.<sup>52</sup>

In literary matters, the sense of a project to elucidate, if not a programme, remained palpable. Jonathan Franzen remained a privileged reference for the editors,

---

<sup>46</sup> ‘A Labor Movement’.

<sup>47</sup> Eli S. Evans, ‘The Battle of Wisconsin’, 11: *Dual Power*, spring 2011.

<sup>48</sup> *Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis*, New York and London, 2014, pp. 133–4, 140. Nonetheless, Kunkel is committed to a strategy including the elaboration of concrete institutional alternatives. See his contribution to The Editors, ‘Election Preview’, online only, 5 November 2012.

<sup>49</sup> And as the editors made plain in an elaborately literary introduction to the new feature, it was also a specifically cultural intervention against the historic ruralism of us culture, aimed at restoring the city to its real centrality. The series has so far run to twenty-odd items.

<sup>50</sup> Dayna Tortorici, ‘Sex Class Action’, 14. A year later, Tortorici took a leading part in organizing a print and online memorial for Shulamith Firestone, the pioneering feminist, who had just died. See Ti-Grace Atkinson and many others, ‘On Shulamith Firestone’, 15; Dayna Tortorici, ‘On Firestone’, and Jennifer Baumgardner and others, ‘On Firestone, Part 2’, online only, both 26 September 2012.

<sup>51</sup> 21.

<sup>52</sup> 22: *Conviction*, spring 2015, and see also Nikil Saval, online only, ‘In Baltimore’, 29 April 2015.



who devoted a symposium to his 2010 novel, *Freedom*, in which they saw a triumph of immersive realism and a benchmark for future writing.<sup>53</sup> The editorial ‘World Lite’ concluded a long, formidably well-read expedition through the conceptual and empirical history descending from Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* to the late-Russhian Davos of Global Lit, with a call for a renewed literary ‘internationalism’, a commitment to ‘project’ rather than ‘product’, and to ‘truth’ over the prevailing canon of ‘the literary’.<sup>54</sup>

In ‘Cultural Revolution’, published two years ago, *n+1* presented its most systematic survey ever of the general situation and prospects. Again not quite a programme, nevertheless it showed something of the necessary, clarifying schematism of the genre, in its review of options for left intellectuals such as those gathered around the magazine. Looking back over the decades since the political reflux of the left in the 70s, and beyond that to the heyday of Western Marxism, the editors recalled the anxiety that haunted much cultural theorizing and analysis. Could it be, as Marcuse had suggested in the 1930s, that culture was largely affirmative, with little or no remaining power of negation? That, as Bourdieusians came to hold, in a later period,

More and more the social purpose and deep content of all culture [including that of the intellectual left] has seemed one identical substance: the content is capital and its purpose is to reproduce capitalism[?]<sup>55</sup>

Or might it not be that the deteriorating conditions of intellectual work, whether in (or not quite in) the academy or in an increasingly pinched commercial publishing sector, are now opening up new possibilities for left intellectuals. Not all of these are welcome. One, the worst of all, is that there will be a new social rarefaction of autonomous culture—and, with that, a loss of critical charge—as rising talents decide that the probable costs are too high, the chances of a reasonable living too remote. At the ideal opposite, there lies the path towards cultural revolution and the human transformation heralded by Trotsky in the closing pages of *Literature and Revolution*.<sup>56</sup> The declassing of intellectuals currently in progress might sharpen the edge of a critical culture and enhance the social credibility of those who labour to produce it in visibly unprivileged circumstances. In this, and the creation of independent and accessible institutions of popular learning, were preconditions for the emergence of truly organic intellectuals of the working class and ‘a ProBo challenge’ to the cultural fatalism of ‘the BoBo consensus’. The third possibility saw the return of an old metaphor, now rewritten. This would mean ‘the confinement of important varieties of culture . . . to demographic archipelagos amid rising seas of mass corporate product’. There would

---

<sup>53</sup> ‘Four Responses to *Freedom*’, 10.

<sup>54</sup> The Editors, ‘World Lite’, 17: *The Evil Issue*, fall 2013. Dissenting from this programmatic approach, associated with Kunkel and her fellow-editor Saval, Carla Blumenkrantz has declared her preference for a less ‘project-oriented’ formula in fiction editing, with a stress on ‘exploration’ rather than ‘rigour’. (See Krill, ‘Take a page from this’.)

<sup>55</sup> The Editors, 16: *Double Bind*, spring 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Trotsky (1924), Ann Arbor 1960.

be no expectation of making a living from serious artistic pursuits, which would be financed by ‘uninspiring and ill-paid day jobs’. Such ‘cozily disappointed existence, streaked with fear of unemployment’, was already familiar as the decivilizing formula of the present.

These, in outline, were the historic options, the unresolved stakes in the ‘intellectual situation’ considered in the most general terms. The editors concluded:

We’re trying to figure what to do from an unstable position amid crumbling institutions and generalized crisis. More than one variety of brave and honest, necessarily incomplete response to the dilemma can surely be offered, and still more varieties of evasive bullshit: a good ear will know the difference. We can’t bring ourselves to cheer the failure of institutions that have sustained us — but we can at least be grateful that the collapsing structures are carrying out a sort of structural rescue of meaningful individual choice, in politics and culture. Bobo or ProBo? Siege mentality (‘We writers are in this together!’) or sorties beyond the walls: ‘We’re in this with almost everyone!’? Reform existing institutions, or replace them, or cultivate your own garden, or retire to your Unabomber cabin? . . . What counts is history asking us a question — about our content or purpose in a society of accelerating insecurity, including our own — that one way or another we need to formulate as sharply as possible, since we answer it with our lives.<sup>57</sup>

## Who is $n+1$ ?

The existential turn of the closing lines is characteristic—a term of judgement that itself looks back to Schwarz’s advice but perhaps with a sharpened sense of the associated meanings of the word. ‘Who is  $n+1$ ?’ is an apt question to ask about a magazine that not only *has* a character but arguably *is* one. That this character bears a close resemblance to persons that the founding editors are or were, and to all or some of their collaborators, does not alter the fact that it is an invention occupying a different order of reality from that of passports and driver’s licences. It is a fiction—a virtuous one, let it be said at the outset. The character is a writer, of course, but one who wants to ‘be a writer’, and the reason why self-evident achievement seems in this way never quite to fulfil the aspiration is that this writer is young and insecure, and, being a fiction, can never grow older or become settled. *Bildung* is the common label for narratives featuring a protagonist of this kind, and also the master-trope of  $n+1$ . Three of the magazine’s founders—Gessen, Harbach and Kunkel—have published first novels in this category and a fourth—Roth—has written a memoir of his family.<sup>58</sup> (Gessen

---

<sup>57</sup> ‘Cultural Revolution’, 16.

<sup>58</sup> Kunkel, *Indecision*, 2005; Gessen, *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, 2008; Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 2011; Roth, *The Scientists: A Family*, 2012.

has also written an account of the *Bildung* of Harbach as novelist.<sup>59</sup>) The trope recurs throughout the archive. Essays as different as Lawrence Jackson's account of Baltimore and Jedediah Purdy's discussion of neoliberalism as discourse are structured as coming-of-age narratives.<sup>60</sup> The editors visit the occupation in Lower Manhattan and 'the only people we see', besides friends, are young hopefuls, interns from all over publishing.<sup>61</sup> Precarity—high rents, low pay, self-exploitation and a poor outlook—is a constant in reports from the industry. In more recent times, the magazine's personnel roster has been listing some of its creators twice: once in respect of their current roles and a second time, as an unvarying (invariable) group, the 'Founding Editors'. It is as though in a part of their being they will always be that thirtyish bunch of friends with an idea for a magazine.

## Arriving late

The rhetoric of generation is as marked in *n+1* as it commonly is in the public discourse of the us, and in this case the governing feeling is one of belatedness. It is too late for Theory, too late for postmodern style, too late for the comforts of aestheticism in the Eggers vein, and far too late for illusions in the American imperium and the presumption that comes with a high-end education. Even growing up is not what it once was, as privileged and parlous life circumstances combine to prolong the twenties past thirty. But as Gessen wrote, 'It is time to say what you mean.' Or in Roth's 'shameless', punning retrospect, 'if I'm late to the party, I can start a party of latecomers'.<sup>62</sup> The sense of an ending did not imply general disconnection, which would have been paralysing. There were supporting precedents, both close in time and further back, for critically engaged writing: in *The Baffler* and *Hermenaut*, for instance, but above all in the early *Partisan Review*, with its exemplary combination of independent leftist politics and modernist cultural sympathies, and free-floating metropolitan demeanour. 'The greatest of magazines' in its heyday, in Gessen's judgement, *Partisan Review* was a vivid historical image rather than a template. *n+1*'s interweaving of culture and politics is more intricate than *pr*'s was, and its range is more extensive across media and national borders—though more haphazard too, in the latter respect. Time will tell whether its talent-spotting skills have been comparable. The spirit of *pr* and its milieu is perhaps best caught in the tenor of the magazine's essays, including very notably the editorial 'Diary', which has a recognizable ancestry in the older magazine's successive

---

<sup>59</sup> Gessen, *How a Book Is Born: The Making of The Art of Fielding*, an expanded version of 'The Book on Publishing', *Vanity Fair*, October 2011.

<sup>60</sup> Jackson, 'Slickheads'; 'The Accidental Neoliberal', 19.

<sup>61</sup> Verb tense altered for context.

<sup>62</sup> Jesse Montgomery, 'Young Critics: Marco Roth', *Full Stop*, 22 June 2011. See also Roth, *The Scientists*, p. 174.

forms of commentary.<sup>63</sup> The address is serious, though not cultivating gravitas. The style is lay, not academic, as in what used to be called the higher journalism. It is flexible in register to a degree that could not have been contemplated in the 1940s, when the proprieties of diction were far stricter, and in that, the comparison must be limited. But the combined seriousness and conversational ease of *n+1*, with its wide variation of feeling and ready access to the language of the street and campus, are reminiscent of the manner that John Hollander called New York Baroque.<sup>64</sup>

This should not be mistaken for an instance of the putative postmodern collapse of high into low culture, for all the superficial resemblance there is, and even if that period atmosphere was a formative condition of what was now taking shape. It was rather, we might say, that the logic of belatedness released its enabling potential, so that a group of young writers deeply schooled in the intellectual and artistic currents of the 1990s but finding them already failing as responses to the political and cultural conditions of the new century, was driven to look for orientation further back, in the traditions of the 1930s.

## Beyond Kulturkritik and Cultural Studies

*Partisan Review* was the glowing icon of a usable past for this party of latecomers, but the sense of the *n+1* initiative can be captured in more general historical and conceptual terms. For much of the twentieth century, in the metropolitan zone, high discourse on culture was dominated by a narrative that pitted traditional values, a minority commitment, against a modern mass civilization that threatened to extinguish them. This Kulturkritik, as it was named in its German homeland, developed a Marxist strain in Frankfurt Critical Theory. Then, emerging some sixty years ago, new perceptions and valuations of majority culture—‘mass’ or ‘popular’, depending on the case and the emphasis of the argument—rose to challenge the conventional accounts of the modern landscape of meaning, most influentially in the institutional form of Cultural Studies. This too was conceived as a critical discourse, not less so because of its unambiguous positioning on the left, though it tended at times to settle into a reflex egalitarian defence of majority culture against the elites of Kulturkritik and their alter ego, a remote, uncomprehending ‘left’, and in some incarnations became notorious for its wishful political transvaluations of popular cultural experience.

In the perspective of Kulturkritik, this was a necessary fulfilment: Cultural Studies as the final collapse of inherited standards in the face of market populism. On the left,

---

<sup>63</sup> At different times and in different shapes in the first decade, ‘Ripostes’, ‘This Quarter’ and ‘Variety’. See for one illuminating instance, ‘Variety’, 15, 6, 1948, consisting of Lionel Trilling, ‘The Repressive Impulse’ and Anatole Broyard, ‘A Portrait of the Hipster’. This was the most significant of several borrowings from pr editorial design.

<sup>64</sup> Hollander was referring to the milieu of ‘the New York intellectuals’ as a whole, not just *Partisan Review*.

relations between the two discursive strains have seldom been better than watchful. Both are present in *n+1*, in the iconic figures of Adorno and Bourdieu, but what is remarkable is that here, for all the differences there must finally be between them, they cooperate in a loose-limbed critical discourse on contemporary culture in which the familiar binaries, while not lost from view, have lost their power of intellectual inhibition. In the space so opened, critical judgement can be exercised freely and knowledgeably in every register of the culture, in recognizable evaluative idioms both old and new, and in perspectives defined primarily by the aspirations of direct cultural producers and their lay audiences. Trails of money, real estate and educational privilege—the stuff of ‘sociological’ place-holders where there is no real ‘value’ to judge, as some say—are followed from the backstairs rooms where publishers’ interns devil away in the hope of better things to the heights of the literary novel and the concert hall.

If belatedness was the main condition of this breakthrough, another, in contrast, was an accident of synchrony. The founding editors are exactly contemporary with the digital remodelling of culture that defined the 1990s and the first decade of the new century: college students in the early days of Mosaic and Amazon, new graduates when Google arrived, editors of a new magazine in 2004, the year of Facebook.<sup>65</sup> Young enough to have native fluency in the new technologies but sufficiently formed in a predecessor culture to be able to appraise their emergent behavioural syndromes at a cool distance, they were gifted a whole field of critical opportunity in the form of the blank ‘revolution’ they were quick to identify and satirize as ‘webism’.<sup>66</sup> In all, the result has been a continuous stream of commentary on culture today, uniting evaluative, interpretive and explanatory modes, across media, institutions, registers and forms, appraising corporate practice and mass-individual *habitus* with the same aplomb: a concentration of work without precedent or equal in the us or anywhere else.

## The fortunes of politics

The defining moment of this unlikely discursive confluence is *n+1*’s Ortega Paradox, as it might be dubbed: the move in which a self-defined elite of the left appropriates a reactionary, fatalistic appeal to inherited prerogatives, rewriting it as a mobilization of retrievable or discoverable cultural standards, in the name of a real equality still to be won. At this point, cultural commentary inevitably takes a political turn. The shared limitation of Kulturkritik and Cultural Studies was their discursive evacuation of politics as a mode of social authority. This logic was more fully worked through in the case of conservative-liberal Kulturkritik, where established positions and interests could more easily be sublimated as heritage and standards—the feint that *n+1* missed, or creatively misread. On the left, outcomes have been less predictable, and potentially more misleading. In *n+1*, on the whole, as in *Partisan Review* before it, this culturalist

---

<sup>65</sup> Kunkel, born 1972; Roth, 1974; Gessen, Greif and Harbach, all 1975.

<sup>66</sup> The Editors, ‘Internet as Social Movement’, 9.

dissolution-effect has not operated. It too has expressly rejected the moralism to which Kulturkritik has always been constitutionally prone:

If human rights are to be reclaimed they must first be restored to the realm of politics. Not the realm of morality, which is always and ever a discussion of good versus evil, but politics.<sup>67</sup>

However, this is not to say that the articulation of politics in the multivocal discourse of the magazine is a simple matter. Politics is a pervasive inflection in its contents, yet some of the work published under that formal rubric seems to have little connection with politics in any ordinary sense, even where the substance is a familiar heading in public discourse, and political commentary overall, especially on the home front, has been relatively scant. Obama passed his first term unscathed in *n+1* and still commanded a majority of votes in the editorial preview of his bid for re-election, even if the enthusiasts were a minority; the abstentionist position was noted—critically—but not voiced.<sup>68</sup> The *New York Times* has attracted more criticism for its incoherent response to the decline of its historic publishing model than for its policy orientations.<sup>69</sup> There are strictly political considerations at work in such judgements, of course. But it seems safe to add, for this case in particular, that the literary ethos of the magazine has not always assisted the development of its political voice. The Poundian injunction to ‘make it new’ seems ideally suited to a vision of socialist transformation. But in one key respect it may be not at all well matched. The modern valorization of the negative implies a discursive rule of non-repetition, a constant practice of innovation and departure, that is in tension with the conditions of political discourse, in which repetition is a fundamental resource and necessity. ‘What could we say that hadn’t already been said?’, Roth asked rhetorically, explaining the surrealist proposal for Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>70</sup> That is not the point, and he could hardly have chosen a less favourable illustration of his case. No political position is the worse for having been stated more than once; what counts is whether it is valid or not, according to the calculus of rights and interests in play. And so long as a pressing demand goes unmet, it has to be reiterated.

*Partisan Review* now appears in a contrastive light. In the years after its refoundation in 1937, the magazine was intensely focused, politically, by the great issues

---

<sup>67</sup> Introduction to The Editors, ‘A Solution from Hell’, 12: *Conversion Experience*, fall 2011. Compare, for example, William Phillips on Ignazio Silone’s *The Seed Beneath the Snow*: ‘The Spiritual Underground’, *Partisan Review*, 9, 6, 1942.

<sup>68</sup> The Editors, ‘Election Preview’, 5 November 2012. The assassination of Osama bin Laden prompted another exercise in displaced politics in the shape of a piece of participant observation of the celebrating crowds at Ground Zero. There was no mention of the politics of the event, either the regressive, sports-sodden nationalism of the revellers or the small matter of premeditated executive murder in an allied foreign jurisdiction (Richard Beck, ‘Ground Zero’, 1 May 2011, 2 May 2011.)

<sup>69</sup> The Editors, ‘Addled’, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Roth, quoted in Krill, ‘Take a page from this’, *Haaretz*.

of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath: the meaning and direction of Stalinism, the struggle against counter-revolution in Europe, the class character of the imminent world war. The editors of *n+1*, like others before them and since, have made comparisons with the Revolution in their account of the internet transformations of their own time, but with an air of fluctuating conviction that should perhaps be read as a stand-in for due scepticism. The stricter comparisons are with earlier communications technologies such as rail and television, which had myriad social effects while remaining, like the political leaflets in the editors' parable of webist street agitation, blank. They were not, in the relevant sense, revolutions at all. Politically, the greater emphasis must fall on the contrasts, which at this date mark a difference of epoch.

*Partisan Review* made the Russian Revolution integral to its project . . . Indeed, but there is another way of seeing this connection, to use a word that is itself deficient for the purpose. *pr* belongs organically to the history of the Revolution, in the sense that it was one of the many embodiments of the surge of hope and energy released by the events of October, at first and mainly in the international workers' movement and the parties of the new, Communist International. The lines of transmission were both organizational and biographical. The magazine was initiated as an organ of the Communist John Reed Clubs, edited by two party members, Ukrainian Jews by birth and upbringing (Philip Rahv) or parentage (William Phillips). In the refounded *pr* the political continuities with October were direct, in the persons of Trotsky, who wrote in the early numbers, and Victor Serge, who contributed both fiction and theoretical-political writing, debating with the editors and members of their New York circle over the class character of the Soviet Union. That political engagement, just as much as the programmatic modernism and philo-Europeanism of its cultural orientation, is what powered *Partisan Review* in its great, early years. The magazine continued for some years in this vein, but editorial departures (over the politics of the war) and incipient Cold War pressures were debilitating. A principled anti-Stalinist communism was soon metamorphosing into anti-Communism, full stop. The ten-year retrospective published in 1946 left few traces of the revolutionary contentions of the early years, and it was given to the literary critic Lionel Trilling, rather than anyone more central to the *pr* of the thirties, to preside over the volume with a lulling, or prophylactic, invocation of politics 'united with the imagination and subject to the criticism of mind'<sup>71</sup>—a sweet Arnoldian phrase, faultless in its abstraction, with a compromised future ahead of it, in the Cold War decades.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Trilling, 'Introduction', Williams Phillips and Philip Rahv, eds, *The Partisan Reader: Ten Years of Partisan Review 1934–1944: An Anthology*, New York 1946, p. xvi.

<sup>72</sup> *Partisan Review* benefited from covert cia funding at various times in the 1950s and 60s, as a significant locus of the 'Non-Communist Left' activity the Agency sought to cultivate throughout the capitalist world—a fact rather too cryptically acknowledged by Mark Greif in his recent homage to the magazine, 'What's Wrong with Public Intellectuals', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 February 2015.

Forty years later, that conflict had been concluded in the interests of capital. The Communist regimes had fallen or remade themselves, and the historic movement from which they had emerged did not long survive them. The major formations of the left, communist or social-democratic, surrendered to the gravitational pull of the new strategic dominant of neo-liberalism, leaving the work of fundamental opposition to an ever more diverse array of political agencies. There was no doubting the militant energies that such agencies could tap, as the many movements of the 1990s and after attested. But equally there was no denying that the imaginative world of *Partisan Review* had ended. This historic closure defined the political horizon within which *n+1* took shape, entrenching a further cause and condition of belatedness in the founding group—a fading of communication with the high tradition of revolutionary thought. The turn to the critique of political economy—Marx and his inheritors in our own time—is admirable, but there have been fewer signs of focused interest in the canon of socialist political theory. In a left culture in which the foremost oppositional slogan of recent times—*We are the 99 per cent!*—is a demagogic evasion of social reality, the critical considerations of classical Marxist politics are hardly at a discount. Yet Lenin appears, when he does, as a half-seen figure in the distance, a stock reminder of what is not to be done,<sup>73</sup> and Trotsky’s visionary conclusions in *Literature and Revolution* are no substitute for his elaboration of the theory of united fronts or critique of bureaucracy.

But after all, the homage to Trotsky comes in a text devoted to the theme of cultural revolution, reminding us of what *n+1*’s essential, justifying work has been, in its first decade. Not politics, with all qualifications made one way or another, even though its atmosphere has been political throughout; and not literature, oddly, except in the old meaning of the word that encompasses far more than the arts of literary fiction; but criticism, sustained, radical, formally resourceful critical commentary on the high and popular cultures of the times, broad in sympathy but quick to judgement, moving in a clearing beyond Kulturkritik and Cultural Studies. The magazine has been exemplary in this, bearing out the old wisdom that looks among latecomers for the unexpected novelty.

---

<sup>73</sup> But see also Kunkel’s comments on ‘democratic dictatorship’, and invocation of Gramscian ‘hegemony’, in his contribution to the 2012 ‘Election Preview’.



The Ted K Archive

Francis Mulhern  
A Party of Latecomers  
July/Aug 2001

New Left Review, Issue 10, July/Aug 2001.  
<[newleftreview.org/issues/ii93/articles/francis-mulhern-a-party-of-latecomers](http://newleftreview.org/issues/ii93/articles/francis-mulhern-a-party-of-latecomers)>

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**