

Translated excerpt

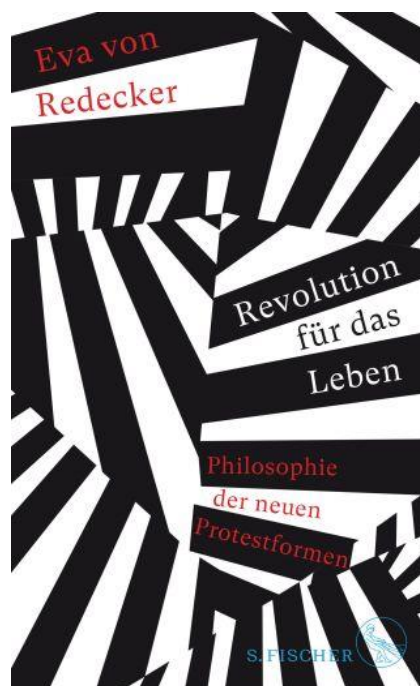
Eva Von Redecker
Revolution für das Leben.
Philosophie der neuen Protestformen

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Eva von Redecker
Revolution for life.
A philosophy of the new forms of protest

Translated by David A. Brenner



CHAPTER: “Revolution”

Capitalism has promised us a life like in the movies, swinging on our front porches. Instead, we find ourselves on a high-speed roller coaster that’s slowly coming apart at the seams. Nature is being exhausted through our practices of appropriation and exploitation, blindly grinding their ways into our planet’s ecosystems and our delicate social existence. Capitalism is destroying lives and is destroying life itself. Are we on some kind of trip that can’t be interrupted? Will anybody reimburse us for the costs, or are we all now stakeholders in the company? How do we out of here, high enough and far enough away? Or is this a trip that can even be stopped? What if we’ve buckled ourselves in too tightly? And what should it look like, this “revolution for life”?

[SECTION 1] O Fortuna!

It’s widely thought that the “end of history” triumphantly proclaimed in 1989 was misdiagnosed. In the three decades since, we’ve witnessed new political arrangements, along with economic and even ecological transformations. But it’s also important to note that these pivotal events in Western history haven’t really been processed using the tools of the historian. They’re instead experienced as a sudden imposition [now p. 128] of fate. Events such as 9/11, the financial crisis, increased authoritarianism, climate change, migration, Covid-19 – we’ve observed them all with incredulity, as if mesmerized by a wheel of fortune. Nor do we understand how those events make sense or what we’ve had to do with them.

When turmoil like this makes itself felt, the few of us still unexposed may manage to avoid getting whiplash like others. If we can’t close our eyes to all the disasters, we can still ignore all the significant connections. That way we feel as

though we've been surprised by fate. And there's something true about this: we're always having to deal with a mixture of chance and something inaccessible – with what is called *contingency*. It's a context of destruction that comes back to us like a medieval miracle play.

The figure of Fortuna, a goddess of chance who turns fate's wheel according to her fancy, was especially popular before the modern era. Sudden changes might be attributed to her, as lamented in the *Carmina Burana* of the High Middle Ages. One of the most famous pieces in this collection of songs is "O Fortuna," set to music in the 1930s by Carl Orff. Here's how it describes fate: "Like the moon | you are changeable." Fortuna's deeds can thus be compared to the natural cycle of tides. Similarly, they are difficult to cope with once they've interrupted human lives and plans. "Terrible luck and hollow, | circling wheel [are] you," curses the unknown narrator.

[SECTION BREAK]

At times I explain the historic ups and downs that characterized last year alone as a [now p. 129] kind of personal parallel universe – what logicians refer to as a "possible world." I imagine myself having gotten the teaching position at the University of Venice that I'd recently applied for and that would've commenced in October 2019. To be honest, I was already uneasy during the interview. It seemed absurd to be putting oneself out in confident careerism for a job at a university when you know that – barring a major shift in climate policy – the place will have sunk into the Mediterranean before you retire. While in Venice I also kept getting lost among the Carnival crowds. At each turn I encountered the same blank looks from mass-produced holiday masks.

Just four weeks later, Venice was actually submerged under water for a time. Its brackish lagoon had risen 1.87 meters above its normal level, saturating buildings, alleys, and plazas. Something about this flooding obeys a recurring cycle: it reaches its highest level each November when the moon is full. But it can also break free of that cycle. Although the marble-clad St. Mark's Basilica has been flooded only six times in its 900-year history, it's happened twice in the last few years. "Like the moon | you are changeable."

Did the imminent sinking of this capital of all honeymoon cities lead Europeans to reduce their carbon emissions? No, alas. However, fashion magazine *Vogue* initiated a fundraiser, making its cover available for the campaign and locating a perfectly morbid backdrop for a model posing in a black bat-sleeved dress. When the magazine repeated the call in its February issue just prior to the Milan Fashion Week, the new coronavirus was already spreading in Veneto and in Milan. The fashion show was then canceled, and a few [now p. 130] weeks later all of Italy was placed under the most draconian lockdown in modern times. It would've have been "terrible luck" if I'd gotten that job, and it's been "terrible luck" generally to be living in times like these. Only: where is the perspective for a fundamental transformation supposed to come from, as long as all these ups and downs are keeping us in such suspense?

From late antiquity to the Latin Middle Ages, there were different ways of dealing with Fortuna's whims. For instance: the Bergamo-born scholar and politician Boethius reconciled himself to being slandered and imprisoned by personifying philosophy as a character in his *Consolatio* (published in 525). There, "Philosophy" explains to the fallen protagonist that Fortuna can't harm him if he just remembers that wealth, renown, and reputation – and even life itself – are not really possessions. Only what's truly ours can't be taken away from us. In a sense,

Philosophy is recommending that one distance oneself from everything that's moving, instead focusing as much as possible on the center of fortune's wheel. After all, one ought to be able to identify a fixed point there. Yet, according to Boethius' inventive Scholasticism, that point is reserved for God – an image not particularly compatible with the pagan one of Fortuna.

While this wheel of fortune allows one to renounce the world, it may likewise enable a defiant turn toward politics. The transience of luck ultimately reveals how nothing is entirely certain. Those whom we complain about today may be swept out of power tomorrow. Next to illustrations of Fortuna's Wheel, one often finds the following maxim: *Regnabo; regno; regnavi; sum sine regno* ("I will reign; I am reigning, I have reigned; I no longer reign"). [now page 131]

[SECTION 2:] The Radius of Politics

In the modern era, Fortuna doesn't depose kings; revolutions do. And revolution doesn't just bring down individual kings. In Paris the monarchy itself was overthrown, and in Port-au-Prince it was the colonial regime as such.

Although *revolution* takes its name from those constant rotations – i.e., the orbiting of heavenly bodies known as *re-volutio* – it's precisely the experience of revolution that replaces this image of a fate-like rotation in the modern understanding of history. The great revolutions at the end of the 18th century, in North America, the Caribbean, and France, inaugurated a new interpretation of political action. Not some transit station that one passed through again and again, revolution was instead the starting point for a new order and making further progress within it. And revolution didn't occur owing to the whims of the cosmos or even laws of astronomy. Nor did it happen on its own. It was instead produced

by people who realized that their situation was not simply fated but the result of actions taken by authorities past and present.

Realizing that social conditions can be shaped isn't a unique insight. It's more an experience that appears in the course of rebellion and self-government and that – in hindsight at least – has been consolidated. From his vantage point in East Prussia, Immanuel Kant observed that the historical lesson of this insight could not “be forgotten” – something that applies all the more to those participating in it. What's no longer forgotten is freedom, that experience of being able to reach agreement and govern together. It's a unique and delightful feeling, but it's accompanied by a realization that there's no turning back. Every new type of authority can now be seen in a different light [now p. 132]: it can be revolutionized. In addition, it has an impact on the servant class: there's now an alternative to having to obey others unquestioningly.

But what exactly is one governing when one governs oneself? Two opposing impulses stand out when examining politics in democracies. There are two different paths to preserving one's freedom from the authority of others: either by sharing or by guarding one's vested rights. The first path, often marking the beginning of revolutionary upheavals, arrived in advance of the great revolutions. It could be found in maroon communities, in common lands and peasant revolts, among ship's crews and itinerant scholars. It has lived on in the Paris Commune of 1871, in the Kurdish Rojava, among Mexican Zapatistas, on the open source platform GitHub, and in a number of collectives. It is government by those who are prepared to share. They determine collectively what connects and what separates them. Of course, that assumes that there's something that people have in common and that they're all entitled to. The tradition of people sharing things democratically is therefore closely linked to struggles over common property and

rights to access. The earliest written documents in this tradition are located in the *Magna Carta* of 1215, which settled a feud between the English crown and nobility, as well as in the *Twelve Articles* of those confederated in the Peasants' War of 1525. The *Magna Carta* was accompanied by a “map [*carta*] of the forest,” a fact almost forgotten in the lore which surrounds it. For, along with liberation from serfdom, the program of that early modern revolt included as a central demand unhindered access to forested lands. The extent of this demand only becomes clear when one recognizes the role played by wood in the pre-industrial economy. It served as fuel, as material for building houses and fences, and as animal feed in the form of [now p. 133] roots and saplings. The fact that some of the trees were regularly “decapitated” – cut back to the trunk – resulted in material that grew back quickly and was easy to divide back up. And around the trees, grass could be grown for grazing. In the forest itself, people could hunt smaller wildlife while harvesting mushrooms and berries. The peasants confederated under Thomas Müntzer wanted to re-open those common lands and forests which were under enclosure for the “common people” – i.e., for those who owned nothing but public property. Doing something like that in today's economy would be tantamount to socializing all the oil and other energy reserves, or to be given free membership in housing cooperatives, or to receive basic material provision. Yet, in the long run, neither forest rights nor equal access to other public property could be defended against the avarice of the powerful. Consequently, a tradition of sharing only flares up intermittently in human history. That's precisely why its principles, summed up by historian of ideas Massimiliano Tomba as “rebellious universalism,” have an unrestricted reach like this. For there aren't any requirements to meet to be able to participate in such sharing. You don't have to own anything: the world's already available. In order to come together as “a community,” one doesn't need to find

common ground or to have proven one's equal status, given that equality among ourselves starts with being connected through sharing.

The French Revolution too was motivated by rebellious universalism. That rebellion against the rights of the nobility to forests, lands, and loyal subjects led the National Assembly on the famous “Night of August 4th” to abolish all feudal privileges. But the claims of a community [now p. 134] would soon be “enclosed” in a new form of property-based politics.

At the same time, then, that the French Revolution was turning against old privileges, it was actually consecrating private property. That's why French economist Thomas Piketty writes of a post-revolutionary “proprietary ideology.” Under that guise, the unequal structures of ownership found in the *ancien régime* were mostly permitted to survive. Compulsory labor was now considered a form of tenancy; one-time fees had to be paid to be released from serfdom; and the disposition of large estates – as a form of absolute material control – became more exclusive than ever. In addition to the distribution of goods, this impetus for vested rights permeated the new, more democratic politics. The revolutionary constitution, ratified in 1791, added a further important qualification for those wishing to participate in politics: only propertied men were considered citizens and only they were held to be capable of exercising the right to vote. This legal provision, which the Jacobins tried to overturn at the National Convention, re-appeared in the Napoleonic Code and was then “exported” to almost all of the European countries.

Such newly achieved “human rights” themselves took on the form of property titles, as “inalienable individual entitlements.” Basic individual rights were said to “belong” to individual subjects, thereby guaranteeing them a certain arbitrariness: within the framework of freedom of expression, I can say what I

want; within the framework of religious freedom, I can believe what I want; and within the framework of freedom of contract, I can enter into all manner of possible obligations. Further: my democratic freedom consists in voting for someone whom I hope will represent the general interest, or (when in doubt) at least my own. Government of the propertied is still [now p. 135] the dominant form of democracy in modernity. In the meantime, it has broken away formally from material ownership: the three-tier system of voting rights, weighted according to wealth, was abolished in Imperial Germany in 1871 and in Prussia in 1918. Wide-ranging forms of discipline along with social insurance laws (as of the 1880s) meant that working people too could now be regarded as complete owners of themselves. Suffrage for women depended on their emancipation from the material control of patriarchs; like voting rights for minorities, such rights for women continue to be under the shadow of phantom ownership. Time and again, women have had to first prove that they are reasonable and self-controlled in order to have a say in things.

Putting it more bluntly: one's status as a citizen did not become detached from property. Rather, property itself became more broadly defined and protected in the form of rights and identities. Citizenship hence remains a status that is conditional: one has to "possess" it and be able to qualify as a "self-owning" person. As a result, those subject to material control are the only ones also allowed to govern themselves. And they can be relied on by those in power not to rebel too much against the entrenched system of ownership. For, were they to rebel, they'd literally only have themselves to lose. Owning oneself creates an arena for a politics that's opposed to that of sharing, a politics not of the forest but of the land parcel. So the material of democracy doesn't so much derive from what's held in common but instead from the interests of one's own private domain. That enhances

freedom when it's measured against monarchy, serfdom, or believing in fate. Yet it remains a liberty within the narrowed radius of material control: the promise of having free rein over a fixed domain. The democracy of those who share, something rooted in material [now p. 136] rights of access, is formed differently. It's an open and mobile freedom that offers assistance and calls for self-governance. It's based on a wild attachment to both the shared world and to each another. But where the freedom of those attached loses its material basis, the shared property of the community, then that's when it threatens to disappear.

[SECTION 3:] The Big Hamster Wheel

The political revolution of human rights has not only installed a very narrow horizon of freedom as the guaranteed ownership of oneself, but it has also prepared the path for intensified material control, for practices of utilization and competition that have become gradually more uninhibited. For the relative radius of individual freedoms to property doesn't only keep people objectively unequal, separated into indebted, poor, rich and super-rich; it also stamps out whatever is no longer available to them as a result of democracy. We only determine to a very limited extent how our commonly inhabited earth and the wealth generated on it will be dealt with. Timid regulations hardly even touch on the question of what should be produced or how or for whom, and in the last few decades the leeway granted to political decision-making has been expressly used to let the market have the final word. We thus find ourselves once more in the paradoxical situation of being self-governing but chained to a wheel of fortune.

Meanwhile, up there in the financial markets, capitalism is now being operated officially as a casino. Value is not created at the workbench but by betting on the stakes of others. [now p. 137] Amid the current pandemic, the system of speculation rescued after the 2008 financial crisis is once again being salvaged by

governments and central banks, as if the boss of some gambling joint had decided to occasionally front large sums to his regular customers just to keep the business running. Seen from below, where the dispossessed need income to earn a living and not be evicted from their homes, the whole thing looks like a hamster wheel that just keeps turning. For when an individual runs faster inside it, that only speeds up the wheel for everyone, instead of helping that individual get further. We who remain free are nonetheless constrained by circumstances, dependent on wage labor, sorted out by identity, and constantly under stress.

It might feel like fate but it's not a goddess who gets the wheel turning. Modern capitalism has reinstituted the powerlessness that was supposedly pre-modern, but what remains is a *perpetuum mobile*. This brand-new wheel of fortune has been built from the kit of material control. It thus assembles together nature that can be owned, time that can be owned, and care that can be owned. The fact that something can be owned goes beyond merely making it usable. Modern property, as specifically enshrined in the French Revolution, doesn't just let itself be used. As the only universal form of legal decree in human history, property also justifies forms of abuse and destruction. We therefore re-encounter natural resources as "dead earth," work as "killing time," and care as "coerced devotion." And people who had already been allegedly liberated reappear as burdened owners of themselves. As phantom owners of their own person, they must make something of themselves at any price. They have to get ahead, removing the spokes of the hamster wheel if necessary and converting them into a ladder, so as to climb even higher to get past the others. For the frame of the wheel is placed in motion by the maelstrom of material control. [now p. 138]. After the fixation on ownership comes the maximization of profit: enhancing value, dispensing with the trivial, reaching for the stars, and avoiding the quagmires. One now finds capital at the

hub of the wheel, where some medieval interpreters had placed God as a resting midpoint. Like a ball bearing, then, capital itself is constantly moving. The more turns it makes and the faster its algorithms buy and sell stock, the greater the value it creates.

And the more those inside it are divided, the more smoothly the wheel actually moves. Hardly anyone helps anyone else. Armed with spokes of the wheel, phantom owners can show off twice as much: by stepping on the necks of others while also claiming an authority that no longer exists. They too are like something assembled out of the kit of material control: people who aren't allowed to move, people who can't say "no," people who get thrown under the bus. At every turn of the wheel, there's a recoil: that's what keeps it turning. Because the wheel's so shaky and because it concentrates so much load at its flanks, it's no wonder it runs so hot.

But it's not fate. And we aren't just its tools or ballast. We ourselves are also the goddesses. "Brand New Ancients" is how Kate Tempest refers to us today in her verse epic of the same name. There she describes just how much scope for action we have. Not as demigods or heroes but as individuals, each one of us has at least a slim margin of control over fate: [now p. 139]

In the old days

the myths were the stories we used to explain ourselves.

But how can we explain the way we hate ourselves,

the things we've made ourselves into,

the way we break ourselves in two, the way we overcomplicate ourselves?

But we are still mythical.

We are still permanently trapped somewhere between the heroic and the pitiful.

We are still godly;

that's what makes us so monstrous.

But it feels like we've forgotten we're much more than the sum of all the things that belong to us.

In a number of texts, Kate Tempest has proven herself a decidedly contemporary poet. Schooled in rap – which, like so many artistic innovations of the 20th century, was initially an African-American form – her verses insist that “now” is all that we have. A work of art would be a failure if it were to pass over the everyday social realities of the present. Though hope is at the core of her poetry, it isn't permitted to make use of the future. Whatever this snide, late-capitalist moment is not willing to yield just doesn't exist. But are we “still godly”? The gods and goddesses intervene because the will to the present has been expanded considerably: nothing that ever existed has vanished completely without a trace. [now p. 140] There are things we could always come back to: the common lands, the Haitian Revolution, the Paris Commune. Insofar as they aren't completely forgotten, they give us indications that we can draw upon. To do that, however, we'd first have to stop that wheel. Is it something we can learn from our ancestors? Greek goddesses seem to have been more specialized in wars than revolutions. We brand new ancients may have been Fortuna ourselves for a long

time, looking after the wheel on our own. Yet we apparently don't know how to stop it any more than back when Fortuna was deaf to our laments.

That we can actually be new versions of the ancient Greeks is one of the fundamental ideas in Hannah Arendt's political theory. For her, the democracy of a shared world depends on nothing else than the actions of people themselves. Even without a far-reaching basis in common property, she thinks politics is able to build on what people have in common. Arendt decouples the concept of *interests* from its fixation on increasing the vested rights of individuals making calculations. She turns it instead into a shared point of reference, an “intermediate space” for action: “These interests constitute, in the word’s most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together.”

As a result, we are also in a position to be “related” when we are denied common ownership. For Arendt, human freedom is made possible by getting together to exchange opinions and make decisions. It’s something for which gods and mythical figures might envy us: to be able to do more collectively than as individuals – specifically, to be able to start anew. Arendt doesn’t locate the basic revolutionary form of politics in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* of 1789 [now p. 141], but in the spontaneous forming of councils at the beginning of certain revolutions. Such councils often resisted authoritarian attempts at centralization; examples include the Munich councils created in 1919 after the German Revolution or the Kronstadt councils created in 1921 in response to the Russian Revolution. This form of democratic self-government, in which elected representatives are linked closely to their base, can be traced back as far as the German Peasant Wars, in which the Federal Order of March 7, 1525 stipulated that “one colonel and four councilors from each group in this organization should

be charged and sent . . . so that everyone in the community doesn't have to go together.” Councils were also formed in the anti-Stalinist Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and they can be found in the squares of the Arab Spring, during occupations of buildings, as well as in social movements. Similar mechanisms are everywhere used to coordinate activities like this. There’s either a general meeting or a plenary session in which elected representatives come together from their own democratically constituted sub-groups; they then discuss all the proposals and objections, making decisions that are binding – without being forced into them. These assemblies continue the tradition of rebellious universalism even where interests are initially only shared – since the world is still in the hands of authorities. Gatherings like these can also take place in virtual spaces. But is such a politics in a “non-material” site capable of opposing those forces fixated on property or the maximization of profit? Can we still come together and reinvent the wheel, instead of simply pursuing the private interests clinging to it?