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The Importance of Quentin Meillassoux for Radicals

Eric Fleischmann

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Quentin Meillassoux is a contemporary French philosopher and a teacher at Pantheon-Sorbonne University in Paris. He is also part of the movement that Ray Brassier, a fellow philosopher and translator of some of Meillassoux's work, christened "speculative realism." This disparate group is connected almost solely by a rejection of correlationism—which is the notion that we cannot consider the world separately from the human. Examples of correlationism range from Bishop George Berkeley's extreme assertion that reality consists solely of mind, and objects literally only exist because we perceive them, to the more widely accepted view in philosophy forwarded by Immanuel Kant that—to quote *The Meillassoux Dictionary*—"objects conform to mind, rather than mind to objects" and "mind does not merely reflect reality, but rather actively structures reality." Other thinkers associated with speculative realism are Graham Harman, Ian Hamilton Grant, the aforementioned Ray Brassier, and many more.

In 2006, Meillassoux published his landmark work, which translates as *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*.

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In this book, several different but fundamentally interrelated premises are laid out, such as how pre-human “arche-fossils” undermine correlationism and how mathematics can give us access to things-in-themselves. I will not elaborate on or explain these ideas in this article beyond saying that Meillassoux pushes for a radical knowability of the nonhuman world. Instead, I will focus on his most startling claim—that which regards the notion of contingency. He proposes we return to the Humean problem of causality. David Hume, being an empiricist, believed that causality cannot be proven by mental reasoning and, since we must rely on empirical data to understand the world, we cannot be certain causality exists as a necessary fact.

As Meillassoux puts it, “...can one establish that in identical circumstances, future successions of phenomena will always be identical to previous successions? The question raised by Hume concerns our capacity to demonstrate the necessity of causal connection.” But instead of remaining in this agnostic skepticism, Meillassoux asserts that we must establish a radical certainty that there is no necessity to causality at all. This undermines the idea that things are what they are in the manner that they are necessarily, and logically concludes that everything must instead be contingent. There is no reason anything is what it is, and it could just as easily be anything else. In Meillassoux’s own words, “So long as we believe that there must be a reason why what is, is the way it is, we will continue to fuel superstition, which is to say, the belief that there is an ineffable reason underlying all things.”

This is a fascinating and world-altering claim within the realm of academic philosophy alone, but it is relevant for radical leftists in a specifically political and ideological way. This can be easily summed up in a statement by fellow speculative realist Levi Bryant:

It seems to me that throughout the history of philosophy, one way of distinguishing the revolutionary from the reactionary is that the latter always argues

that there is 1) a necessary order . . . to the social world and that therefore 2) the social world can be organized in no other way. In other words, the reactionary always argues that the social world is either naturally or divinely decreed. By contrast, the revolutionary always argues that the social world is contingent or that things are capable of being otherwise, that our identities, classes, modes of production are, as you put it, “historical”. I take it that when Badiou, Meillassoux (and not incidentally myself!) are interested in contingency to ground this very point: the world does not have to be this way!

It is not far-fetched in the least to think that Meillassoux’s project has underlying revolutionary political motives. His father Claude Meillassoux was a neo-Marxist anthropologist and his teacher Alan Badiou, who also wrote the introduction to *After Finitude*, is an explicit communist. So, I would like to expand and elaborate on this concept.

As Bryant points out, reactionary ideologies rely on a belief in a necessary and natural order. This belief can take many forms, often openly religious or cultural, but many times disguising itself as scientific and rational. A prime historical example is the divine right of kings because if the absolute authority in the universe—the patriarchal version of God—has decreed the manner in which social and political bodies should be organized then that way is the right and natural order. A more scientific-seeming version of this is can be found in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. Hobbes begins with a mechanistic understanding of nature that is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” This violent human nature allows him to justify the necessity of not only a state but an authoritarian one. Except amongst evangelical conservatives and in a choice few countries with non-secular states, the religious justification for government does not often explicitly appear in modern discourse. But the ar-

gument for government because of a selfish, hostile human nature is an extremely common one to this day. Another example of this is the use of scripture, such as the infamous Ephesians 5:22, to enforce a patriarchal form of marriage, or Jordan Peterson's use of lobster neurochemistry to justify social hierarchies. These are just a few instances of reactionary appeals to a so-called natural order amongst innumerable such arguments that range anywhere from "scientific" racism to the classic claim by conservatives that homosexuality is unnatural.

Therefore, time and time again it has been the job of those on the left to not only posit new systems and theories but also to show that what reactionary forces claim is the natural course of things is not necessary after all. A classic work in this vein is Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. Kropotkin demonstrates how the natural world and human societies have actually thrived off cooperation instead of pure individualistic domination. Although this is an appeal to a natural order in itself, it was largely intended to subvert the dominant social Darwinist theories justifying capitalism and harsh class divisions at the time.

A more modern project is that of Mark Fisher. His book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* outlines the titular concept "capitalist realism"—"the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it." Before his untimely passing, Fisher was working on a new book apparently titled *Acid Communism*. There has been much consideration about what the totality of this would look like—pieces I would recommend are Matt Colquhoun's essay "Acid Communism" and Joshua Carswell's blog post "An unprecedented aestheticisation of everyday life': Acid Communism"—but a common consensus is that Fisher's intention was to try to fight off capitalist realism: to awaken the possibility in people's minds that capitalism is not the way the world had to be.

Meillassoux's work stands to become a multitool to underpin revolutionary arguments against appeals to a natural order. But the radical implications of his work go beyond the contingency of social order. This is not simply the project of Michel Foucault, to demonstrate the historical contingency of culture and ideas, but rather an argument that nothing is truly necessary—be it social, biological, physical, etc. This calls to mind the cry from Laboria Cubonik's *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, "If nature is unjust, change nature!" It stands to give a metaphysical grounding to such movements as anarcho-transhumanism, which William Gillis asserts "means not just transcending the strictures of gender, but of genetics and all previous human experience. It means fighting to be allowed the fullest actualization of who and what we want to be, whenever we want to be it." If there is no reason that things are the way they are, there is no reason they should stay that way if they are objectionable and/or undesirable. For those in the radical left, Meillassoux's contingency means that, to use the motto of the World Social Forum, "Another World Is Possible."