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## The Ungovernable Novel: Towards a New Political Imaginary

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The Ungovernable Novel:  
Towards a New Political Imaginary

By

Joseph William Turner

A THESIS

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The Ungovernable Novel:

Towards a New Political Imaginary

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University of Nebraska, 2021

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The primary objective of my thesis is to provide an initial definition of what we could call the “ungovernable novel.” I borrow the concept of the “ungovernable” from the field of political theory, and I apply it to the theory of the novel by way of an engagement of Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Georg Lukács’ theories of the novel. Building on this theoretical foundation, I argue that our contemporary political imagination has reached a historical juncture: we must abandon the dystopian framework that we have inherited from the Cold War, and we must move in the direction of the ungovernable novel. I analyze George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1949) as the quintessential text of the dystopian paradigm. The novel’s dystopic vision has found purchase across the entire political spectrum and has shaped our vision of the future. I argue, however, that we should seek literary examples of "ungovernability" that disorient the ways we imagine moments of "chaos" and allow us to recognize them as experiences of collective joy. The ungovernable novel presents us with a new task: How do we write fictions that emerge from revolts themselves? Using Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "ungovernable," I analyze Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2014) as a text that demonstrates some of the possibilities of an ungovernable imagination. The ungovernable novel reaches out to its readers from the event and allows the novel to deactivate its disciplinary role as an individualizing agent.

This operation frees the imagination, allowing the reader to come to a different understanding of the forms that social revolt may take.

## Only Proles and Animals Are Free

They were beneath suspicion. As the party slogan put it: “Proles and animals are free.”  
(Orwell, 1984, 68).

George Orwell’s most famous works are hailed as critiques of totalitarianism, fascism, and communism (and to remaining leftist readers, of capitalism). But it is time to see these classics, particularly *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), in a new light. Instead of reading this book as a critique of totalitarian ideology, it would be more useful today to treat it as a landmark registering the end of a relationship between Western literature and class struggle. From this vantagepoint, we can begin to unpack the influence that Orwell has had on the popular political imagination across the political spectrum.

Since the start of the Cold War, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has left its mark on the Western political imagination, even serving as an inspiration and justification for conspiracy theories. Orwell, historically recognized as a socialist, has been a central figure for both conservative and liberal talking points—a confluence of political interests that eventually canonized *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a definitive measuring stick for designating a political position as “totalitarian.”<sup>1</sup> The persistence of the seemingly endless cultural references to Orwell’s novel, however, raises several important questions: Why is there a cultural obsession with calling our own age

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed studies of totalitarianism, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society* (1986), and Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2001).]

“Orwellian”? And why does it feel like our imagination is always already situated in an Orwellian framework?<sup>2</sup>

To address these questions, however, we should start by noting the simple historical fact that today there is no organized “left” in the United States (US) in the traditional sense. There is no labor movement or a large enough organization to create a mass movement that could exert significant pressure on the electoral system. Thus, it is worth noting that there is no “leftist” fiction in the US either—at least not since the proletarian novel eclipsed into the dystopian novel during the Cold War (around the time Orwell’s works gained their notoriety). In *The Naked Communist: Cold War Modernism and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Roland Végső discusses the midcentury canonization of anti-communist fiction through a framework that allows us to explain how Orwell’s work could simultaneously function as anti-Communist propaganda and produce an autonomous ideology of its own:

The anti-Communist canon was constructed on the basis of a threefold division of cultural products: at the top of the hierarchy, we find anti-communist modernism; at the bottom, we find anti-Communist popular culture. Between these two extremes, the grand classics of anti-Communism occupy a dubious cultural position. Due to its overtly political nature, anti-Communist literature was always on the verge of being propaganda, so its artistic status was always rather precarious. (105)

In other words, anti-Communist fiction such as Orwell’s could not actually achieve the cultural status of being considered “high art” and instead functioned as a highly effective

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<sup>2</sup> News headlines often present attention-grabbing titles such as: “Paging Big Brother: In Amazon’s Bookstore, Orwell Gets a Rewrite” or “Keeping Online Testing Honest? Or an Orwellian Overreach?” Both of these recent articles were taken from the *New York Times* and are filled with Orwellian buzzwords. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/technology/amazon-orwell-1984.html> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/us/online-testing-cheating-universities-coronavirus.html>.

ideological apparatus for the existing order. As Végő argues, the anti-Communist fiction of the post-war era can be defined “as a fictional field of representation within which the political truth of its own institution can only emerge in a distorted form.” In other words, according to the dominant aesthetic ideology of the times that tried to equate the idea of “freedom” with high-modernist formal innovation, the political commitments of anti-communist fiction could not allow it “to successfully aestheticize its politics” (107). By virtue of its explicitly stated political commitments, anti-communist fiction was always considered to be aesthetically “flawed” as it was always on the verge of sliding into the dubious field of “propaganda.” This inability to fully aestheticize its politics explains why the Orwellian imagination is fundamentally closed: on the one hand, Orwell’s imagination is closed because it sets an absolute limit to the imagination (it claims that what escapes reason cannot be imagined); on the other hand, it is driven by the insight that anything within the given order should be considered possible (even the worst dystopian possibilities).

In the spirit of Végő’s critique, therefore, I would like to offer a provocative hypothesis. Since the Cold War, we have not had a popular leftist imagination in the US, and, in turn, there has not been a leftist novel in the US since that time—only dystopias and utopias that still operate within fundamentally anti-leftist frameworks. When I refer to Orwell’s influence on both “left” and “right” ideas, I am referring to the popular imagination and the way Orwell’s ideas have been reproduced culturally. After the Cold War, Orwell’s works were taught as a warning about the dangers of collectivism and communist ideology. Today, however, they are often evoked as a warning about rightwing fascism or capitalist oligarchy. In other words, it does not matter what political figure or regime is in power: Orwell’s ambiguity will fit any individualist

narrative or any conspiracy theory. Orwell created an imaginary picture of totalitarianism that makes one perpetually afraid of one's own shadow.<sup>3</sup>

How can we escape Orwell today? To answer this question, we will have to start by abandoning the paternalistic notion of “the prole” and the leftist fixation on its subjectivity to better understand the shape of ongoing revolts in the world today. Such a theoretical shift will also help us to challenge the individualist humanism of Orwell's novel. In order to oppose the cultural hegemony of this persistent Orwellianism, I will offer here the idea of the “ungovernable,” not simply to replace the outdated leftist definition of the political subject but also to demolish all romantic notions of a “revolutionary subject.” In other words, what I will propose to call the “ungovernable novel” has no interest in reviving the leftist novel: instead, such works demonstrate explosions of life trapped in representationalist political and aesthetic frameworks as they try to break free from these externally imposed limitations. The ungovernable novel aims to demonstrate life and not to represent political subjects. As I will try to show throughout my argument, the possibility of this redefinition of the novel became first visible through the theoretical tension between Georg Lukács' and Mikhail Bakhtin's definitions of the novel.

The ungovernable novel emerges from a refusal of political civility, management, and representation—refusal being the unifying gesture that is translated into the novel form. The ungovernable novel does not fear the masses; it is the type of novel that fears the loss of the masses through their composition into a representable body or subjectivity. As a result, in this kind of novel, the crowd, the mass, the riot, and other similar formations give life to the story.

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<sup>3</sup> From the obsession of Russia meddling in the election to anti-Semitic conspiracies of global governments, the mark of Orwell is still imprinted on every side of the political spectrum. For more examples see Dorian Lynskey, *The Ministry of Truth* (2000).



Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2014) is arguably one of the finest contemporary examples of what could be called the "ungovernable novel" in the United States thus far. Kushner was influenced by Italian revolutionaries when she transformed what would be a popular fiction novel into a radical text that quite intentionally connects the dots between revolt and life.<sup>4</sup> The novel holds the potential of becoming an event and breaking into the imagination of the reader as it reaches out to the reader from the crowd—imploing them to arm their desires. Thus, Kushner presents us with a novel that gives us a taste of the politics of refusal. *The Flamethrowers* offers a new direction for envisioning the present and the future of political fiction.

As crowds form across the globe to protest police brutality from Minneapolis to Nigeria, these gestures function as expressions of collective power fueled by visions of a different way of living. It is this inspiration that the literary imagination must continue to feed and vice versa. Theorists of protest movements claim that a change of consciousness and the subsequent change of behavior create the conditions for a mass revolt.<sup>5</sup> Theorizing the ungovernable novel is my attempt to expand this changing consciousness into the realm of the literary and to reimagine political fiction through insurrectionary developments. How can we write about these transformations? And how do we achieve a collective dimension to these narratives? Kushner's writing gives us an initial outline to begin reorienting our fictions in a new direction.

### **Formlessness and Content**

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<sup>4</sup> Most notably, the poet, writer, and revolutionary Nanni Balestrini and his collective characters had a significant influence on Kushner's work. We will discuss the connection between both writers later.

<sup>5</sup> See Vicky Osterweil's recent work *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (2020), which does a magnificent job of historicizing and developing a framework of the politics of riots. Joshua Clover's *Riot Strike Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (2016) is another example of a recent development through an economic analysis of popular uprisings; and Phil Neel's *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (2018) offers a nuanced perspective of current political trends across the US from a geographic study.

Before discussing Orwell's and Kushner's fictional texts, I first want to lay out some definitions and briefly explore the historical development of the novel's form. The novel emerged as a contested literary concept since it appeared to have no fundamental formal definition of what it was supposed to be. Could it be its own genre, an inversion of genres, or a parody of all the above? To make this long history short, let us turn to Georg Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* and Mikhail Bakhtin's works (most significantly, the four essays that would appear in the collection *The Dialogic Imagination*),<sup>6</sup> for in the tension between their works we can see the emergence of a possible definition of the ungovernable novel. Lukács referred to the novel as something essentially "formless." For him, the novel had emerged after the classic Greek epic as a response to the new historical experience of a fragmented world. Therefore, it is a degraded epic that has lost the totality of the world. In other words, Lukács is approaching the creation of the novel as a historic-philosophical problem when he claims that the novel form was an aesthetic response to the problem of an ontological "homelessness." In direct contrast to this definition, Bakhtin acknowledges the sense of modern homelessness in the novel and celebrates it as a liberating experience. While this opposition is a useful starting point for a definition of the ungovernable novel, we will have to complicate these two positions by connecting them to the novel's commodification and the crisis of democratic ideals after World War II.

On the one hand, for Lukács, the epic form was the cultural expression born of Greek culture that told the story of man's universal struggle and collective growth. The epic had a philosophical dimension to it, not just in its narrative content but also in its very form. On the other hand, the formless novel lacks a philosophical essence and is symptomatic of the alienation caused by capitalist relations and a strictly individualized relationship to the world. Referring to

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<sup>6</sup> See the collection *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (2000) edited by Michael McKeon for an impressive assortment of key texts by Mikhail Bakhtin, Ian Watt, Georg Lukács, Fredric Jameson, and many others.

his historical moment, Lukács writes in *the Theory of the Novel*, “Our World has become infinitely large, and each of its corners is richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the Greeks, but such wealth cancels out the positive meaning—the totality—upon which their life was based” (34). In other words, the consistency of Greek life already assumed its form, and the epic was merely an expression of it—love, the family, the state (33). The novel was the result of the dissolution of all these elements. The quest to find the metaphysical home that was always already there had been replaced by what Lukács calls the “psychology of the novel's hero” (60): the heroic individual's search for a particular meaning (not a collective truth or home). The loss of totality, then, is the essence of Lukács' theorization of the novel. Even though there are some discrepancies between Lukács' earlier and later work that complicate this position, it is still safe to say that he viewed the novel as a product that represents the individualist morals of the bourgeoisie.

In his vision, therefore, the novel functioned as a way of making totality possible through a convergence of class consciousness and history—in other words, by providing form. Yet, it seems like this form-giving function goes against the thesis of the formlessness of the novel. As Végso has put it, Lukács' theory of the novel is driven by a certain anti-novelistic desire: “the theory of the novel is simply the becoming-conscious of the internal teleology of the novel form, which amounts to a destruction (or sublation) of the form itself” (“The World without the Novel” 75). Put differently, Lukács' theory is another way of bringing form to the formless novel itself, which, according to Lukács's historical narrative, will supposedly create a new way of formalizing historical experience that will no longer be a novel. In Lukács's hands, the theory of the novel becomes an obituary for the novel form.

Bakhtin, however, provided a very different approach to the novel in response to Lukács' nostalgia for a totality. For him, the formlessness of the novel is the cause for celebrating its plasticity. The novel defies genres, traditions, and authoritarian literatures (Bakhtin would see the epic to be an example of authoritarian literature). Instead of viewing metaphysical "homelessness" as a weakness or loss, he understands it as a liberatory development. In its earlier forms, literature reinforced an order and echoed the authority of the past. The novel has made possible the coming together of genres, speech acts, and worlds (what he would describe as "heteroglossia"). Authority is no longer situated in the past but in the unfinalizable present. Thus, for Bakhtin, the epic was about the absolute past as it maintained what he calls a "hierarchical distance" that had no relation to the present. The novel developed precisely as the breaking apart of this hierarchy. In his classic essay "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin states, "The novel took shape precisely at the point when epic distance was disintegrating, when both the world and man were assuming a degree of comic familiarity, when the object of artistic representation was being degraded to the level of a contemporary reality that was inconclusive and fluid" (39). In other words, the messiness of everyday life is part of the novel, and it cannot be formed into a rigid definition or set of characteristics.

Of course, we should keep in mind that Lukács' position on the novel was not entirely negative as his opinions changed throughout his career. Still, he considered middle-class morality to be an essential characteristic of the novel. This is why it is quite significant for us that in *Theory of the Novel* Lukács briefly distinguishes the novel from the "entertainment" novel. It cannot be stressed enough how important this brief aside in the essay is for understanding the dangers of the novel. As he cautions, "The novel—unlike other genres—has a caricatural twin almost indistinguishable from itself in all inessential characteristics: the

entertainment novel, which has all the outward features of the novel but which, in essence, is bound to nothing and based on nothing, i.e., is entirely meaningless” (Lukács 73). What the problem of the entertainment novel shows, then, is that the question of form is really a tension between form and content (or the absence of either of them). Previous more consistent literary forms could be viewed in terms of a specific relation between a genre and a historical moment. The novel’s formlessness, however, complicates this correlation by breaking all these boundaries.

I argue that the ungovernable novel inhabits the cracks between the two thinkers’ literary philosophies. While Bakhtin’s more utopian perspective is tempting, it is crucial to take Lukács’ pessimism seriously and relate it to the popular imagination. His articulation of the entertainment novel resembles what are typically categorized as “bestsellers” today. Lukács warns that the novel’s very formlessness makes it possible for the “empty content” of the entertainment novel to be mistaken for the real thing. But what exactly is an empty content? The commodification and hyper-formulation of the novel certainly could be part of the problem. But what if the real problem is the novel’s growing inability to recognize its own historical moment by placing itself in the non-place of individualistic mythos (Lukács 81)? The entertainment novel (or the popular novel), then, is a fully formalized moralizing and individualizing cultural apparatus. The ungovernable novel, on the contrary, is an apparatus cracked open to reveal ongoing social antagonisms that exist within everyday life.

### **The Governed Imagination of the Popular Novel**

This difference between Lukács and Bakhtin can help us better understand the problem of political imagination today. Consider the following contemporary example: two digital humanities scholars, Jodie Archer and Matthew L. Jockers, designed an algorithm to analyze the content of bestseller novels and determine if there was a formula for a true bestseller. They found that the novels that the algorithm determined as “bestseller content” were all either series that became branded with many different adaptations (*Harry Potter*, *Fifty Shades of Gray*, *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) or had reached the level of at least one film adaptation (*The Help*, *Gone Girl*, *The Devil Wears Prada*) (Archer & Jockers, 202-206). The purpose of bringing up this study here is not to open a debate about the conditions of popularity but to suggest that the popular novel itself might be driven by a desire for predictability and a propensity to surpass its own literary form into another medium of the popular imagination, namely film. Finally, since the popular imagination relies on formulas and tastemakers, we could describe this form of expression in terms of a “docile imagination.” Simply put, we might be encountering here an example of the kind of lack of content that Lukács feared in the entertainment novel: unlike the “real” novel that tried to paradoxically formalize the historical experience of the lack of inherent forms, the popular novel renders this historical experience invisible in a fully predetermined form.

The problem that I want to address here concerns the instances when the political imagination becomes determined by this popular imagination in a way that the two can no longer be separated. Since the popular imagination has been taught to seek out formulas, so too does its corresponding political imagination. This is how a predetermined representational framework becomes the norm for all politics—we either need a leader or need to be the leader for everyone else. Or, to put it differently, we seek out forms of subjectivity in the characters we read, and we

become further subjectivized in the process. A disciplinary novel (arguably the historical function of all novels) serves to instill a civil message, a sense of morality, and presents an individualized narrative.<sup>7</sup> Against Bakhtin, it could be argued that the traditional purpose of the novel was to allow the imagination to occasionally escape but only to a pre-negotiated and limited space that cuts it off from the ungovernable. In this sense, it was a coping mechanism that allowed for fantasies to be explored only within the confines of predetermined limits (for example, what Mark Fisher termed “Capitalist Realism”).<sup>8</sup> The ungovernable novel, however, allows the reader to experience perspectives that call from within events themselves. In the ungovernable novel, a riot is never just happening or in the background. Instead, it is the focal point of interest, and the narrative comes from inside of it, inviting the reader to experience the point of view of a destituent power—a shared power that abandons the task of constitution. In a way, the ungovernable novel teaches the reader how to become ungovernable in whatever form that may be.

The Orwellian imagination is the political culmination of dystopias, revolutionary wars, conspiracies, thrillers, and whatever else resurrects the same humanism and morality that the novel has embodied from its birth. But overall, it is the product of a commodity relation, a complete disconnection from political struggle, and a desire to be entertained. Simply stated, it is consumerist propaganda that hides class antagonisms under individual heroism.

Let us put forward another somewhat controversial hypothesis: the popular imagination is by default a governed imagination because it is propelled only by popular commodities and self-interest. What this means is that the novel itself today no longer serves the cultural function it

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<sup>7</sup> See D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (1988).

<sup>8</sup> See Fisher *Capitalist Realism* (2009).

once did. As Lukács feared, the novel testifies today to a loss of collective purpose. The rise of what is described as “consumer society” and the commodification of the novel into a marketable form must be addressed to understand the intervention that the ungovernable novel makes. In other words, we must acknowledge the “cultural industry” of the novel form as it emerged after the 1950s to understand how the popular novelistic imagination has become driven by the entertainment novel. Indeed, we must learn how the entertainment novel emerged from an excess of attempts to further humanize the world and the consumer society that followed from these attempts.

Both Lukács and Bakhtin provide us with a framework to understand the individualist characteristics of the novel, which can in turn help us understand the prolonged debate over “the death of the novel.” I am not suggesting that we should simply affirm the death of the novel, because it can certainly be argued that many great novels were written after the 1950s. However, I agree with those who claim that the cultural influence of the novel diminished after the 1950s due to a crisis of democracy in the aftermath of fascism and technological changes. In the face of the totalitarian threat of the 1930s, the question of morality and human agency became a popular talking point in US literary and art circles. The individualist roots of the novel made it the ideal cultural vehicle to reaffirm a faith in humanity that had become shaken to its very core after the events of World War II. Mark Greif has recently argued that, in this historical context, “[t]he novel had the obligation to humanize a fallen mankind” (104) as it was called upon to answer the question “what is a man?” Of course, we could further speculate about the failures or successes of these endeavors, but it is more important to consider the trajectory of this discourse. Greif outlines this history in the following terms: “The discourse’s intellectual trajectory rose and declined. It gained urgency in the debate over intervention, expanded once the United States



entered the war, reached an intellectual peak by 1951, and at that point was popularized and banalized” (14). Thus, even if we do not want to assert the actual “death of the novel,” it would be hard to deny that by the 1960s something had changed. The push for this renewed humanism immediately after the war aided the canonization of a nationalist reclaiming of modernist authors. But it could also be argued that, after this mobilization of nationalist morality to reignite a unified humanism, the mass production of literature created other complications for the social function of the novel.

Yes, there are still novels, and many are imaginative and thought-provoking, but aesthetic innovation plays a small role in the popular imagination. In other words, the only popular novel is the entertainment novel; or we can even say that marketability is what gives form to the novel. But this development emerged with the changing of the literary industry and the popularization of various media for entertainment. As we have seen, the ultimate market trajectory for a popular novel is arguably its film adaptation or its transformation into a franchise. While this argument certainly announces a broad set of topics, it is important to maintain focus on the problem at hand. The popular novel is nothing other than a blending of genres and a utilization of literary formulas. Janice Radway, in her groundbreaking study *Reading Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, tackles the popular novel and its techniques through the genre of Romance. Looking back at what is considered the “third paper back revolution” in the 1960s, Radway examines the trends that publishers looked for but more importantly constructed through sales data:

Success, in effect, became a function of accurate prediction. That prediction was ultimately dependent on the capacity to control the interaction between an identifiable audience and a product designed especially for it. Category or formulaic literature has

been defined most often by its standard reliance on a recipe that dictates the essential ingredients to be included in each new version of the form. (29)

In many ways, each novel (despite its genre) is supposed to reinvent the genre, maintain individualistic properties, and still retain the literary components that make it popular (and profitable). The mass-produced popular novel (romance, science fiction, mystery, etc.) essentially must fake its own particularity and difference. It is this representation of individualization that Lukács sensed as a problem of the novel. He argued that the novel's formless "content could not be rationalized" (*Theory of the Novel* 73) and, therefore, could only be represented as a limit of the world through the limit of the individual's experience. This is why there can be so many recycled stories and literary formulas that imagine different universes. But these fictional worlds still cannot overcome the same material problems that exist in our world—a certain historically determined threshold of morality and law cannot be surpassed by these texts. In other words, the individualization of collective experiences produces an infinity of the same mediocrities. Put simply, the function of the popular novel is to reinforce culturally dominant understandings of the world and, thereby, contribute to the disappearance of class struggle. Of course, this reaffirmation of dominant ideologies is not done intentionally by all writers; but it is a consequence of the novel's formlessness in the age of its mass production.

As Radway has argued in her work, the romance novel reinforces the patriarchal relations that create a paradoxical understanding of what women perceive as "reality." She also found that the popular novel produced tensions between individualist "hard work" ideologies and mass consumer culture. For example, she points out the contradiction between women's desires to escape some of their social responsibilities through the act of reading and the way they justify reading as "productive" and "educational" activity: "This return to the ideology of hard work or

productive labor to justify pleasurable leisure activity seems to betoken an incomplete assimilation of the values of a consuming society whose very health depends on its members' continuous purchasing of commodities" (116). She concludes the study by positing that romance writers (or popular novel writers) try to stay away from anything that could disorient the reader's worldview. Instead, they tend to reinforce the reader's sense of normality through presenting a one-sided view of the world. She states: "The characteristic verbal structure of the contemporary romance thus conveniently lends itself to this kind of interpretation by refusing to present the reader with anything capable of disorienting her or of forcing her to attend differently to the substance and organization of signs that cannot be taken so easily as simple, referential gestures" (191).

In light of this discussion of the popular novel, then, we can now return to the canonization of George Orwell's fiction as the paradigmatic source of our political imagination. As we have seen, after World War II, the popular novel reinforced the morality of liberal humanism in response to the horrific historical events of the century such as the emergence of totalitarianism. It was in this context that Orwell's canonization has become a reference point for science fiction, dystopic, young-adult, and political fictions alike. In fact, as I argued above, it is safe to say that the Orwellian imagination is the essential political expression of the popular novel. The commodification of the novel has thus trapped us in continuously reproduced narratives, failed revolutions, and the inability to examine our own historical moment. Put differently, we have collectively forgotten how literature can help us grasp the present, and instead we have retreated into a fictional universe of what is familiar. The ungovernable novel, however, does not seek to become a bestseller: instead, it emerges in relation to social revolts—it aims to disrupt market relations.

## The Prole and Orwell Today

Let us then return, then, to the questions posed in the introduction pertaining to Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell's ideas are integral to both the kind of liberal anti-communism that seeks to position all political discourses in the center and the rightwing legacy of anti-communism. We encounter examples of these positions daily in popular culture and media when a CNN or Fox News pundit labels a specific phenomenon as "Orwellian" or when we pick up the latest dystopian thriller or popular fiction novel. Orwell's influence on popular culture has been overwhelmingly apparent in best-selling works such as Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* among others.<sup>9</sup>

The Orwellian dystopian novel is infused with a sense of elitism and rugged individualism to such a degree that even the most modest revolutionary plot becomes reactionary. These stories are never about a movement but rather a singular person and their agency. Marxist literary scholar Raymond Williams also noticed this legacy on the popular imagination. He considers Orwell's legacy in the following terms: "The key question, however, is what deep structures of consciousness and pressure were producing the shifts during the thirties and forties which in Orwell's case resulted not in an isolated major individual, but what was to be a widely imitated style" (389). It could be argued that what made Orwell's work so prone to imitation was precisely that in the popular imagination it appeared to transcend ideological critique. Yet the fact that Orwell's work did not convey a particular ideology was often missed by critics who tried to criticize him on a preexisting ideological basis. Williams is correct to raise questions about the political changes taking place within not only Orwell's career

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<sup>9</sup> *The Hunger Games* (novel, 2008, and film, 2012) is one of the most successful recent series that have carried on the Orwellian tradition. However, many more titles come to mind, both in film and popular fiction, including *Total Recall* (film, 1990), *The Giver* (novel, 1993), *The Matrix* (film, 1999), *IQ84* (novel, 2009), *The Purge* (film, 2013), and the *Divergent* series (novel, 2011, and film, 2014).

but also everywhere in the West during this time. However, I argue that Orwell's influential role in this universal transformation is quite significant and that the class orientation that Orwell presents in his fictional works has resulted in the erasure of class struggle in fiction. By proclaiming the uselessness of the proles (yet still romanticizing them), he has paved the way toward the speculative and reactionary politics of contemporary popular fiction. As Orwell introduces the proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he dismisses their way of life and erases their power:

It was not desirable that the proles should have strong political feelings. All that was required of them was a primitive patriotism which could be appealed to whenever it was necessary to make them accept longer working hours or shorter rations. And even when they became discontented, as they sometimes did, their discontent led nowhere, because being without general ideas, they could only focus on petty specific grievances. The larger evils invariably escaped their notice. Even the civil police interfered with them very little. There was a vast amount of criminality in London, a whole world-within-a-world of thieves, bandits, prostitutes, drug peddlers, and racketeers of every description; but since it all happened among the proles themselves, it was of no importance. ... They were beneath suspicion. As the party slogan put it: "Proles and animals are free." (68)

The Orwellian symbolic framework is quite evident in a work like *The Hunger Games*: the peacekeepers of the novel function as the "thought-police" serving a totalitarian figure (President Snow) opposed by the conspiracy of a resistance cell (District 13). Like in Orwell's writing, the only narrative perspective that the reader receives is that of the protagonist. Every event is centered around a hero or one character. But the hero must always find a place in the

order of power and its system of reason—either to assimilate into this order or to be destroyed by it. Whether it is Winston’s treasonous writing in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Katniss Everdeen’s learning the secrets of the districts in *The Hunger Games*, there is always a moment when the protagonists are illuminated in a way that others in the story are not. For example, at one point in *The Hunger Games*, when Katniss reflects on her education, there seems to be an Orwellian disconnection between politics and the working class:

Besides basic reading and math most of our instruction is coal-related. Except for the weekly lecture on the history of Panem. It’s mostly just a lot of blather about what we owe the Capitol. I know there must be more than they’re telling us, an actual account of what happened during the rebellion. But I don’t spend much time thinking about it.

Whatever the truth is, I don’t see how it will help me get food on the table. (42)

Even this brief excerpt reads like Orwell’s descriptions of proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: these characters are supposedly simple-minded, hardworking, and unaware of “truth” or “reason.” For the Orwellian imagination, freedom and truth manifest themselves in a sense of order and an identification with that order. As Winston famously declares in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, “Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four” (77). Freedom must fit into the reason of order; otherwise, it is unintelligible and therefore without power, as is the case with the proles. Of course, in *The Hunger Games* Katniss eventually learns the “truth” and finds herself in a position of leadership as she becomes the representative of others’ struggles. Representation is important to recognize here because it demonstrates that Katniss has found a place in the order (even if she intends to disrupt it) and, therefore, she now has political agency in a way that others do not. During a rebellion in the second book, the balance of order falls into her hands. The districts erupt into a revolt. The event is described as a scene of “chaos” that

Katniss manages to instigate all on her own. In the end, however, the proletarian uprising fails as it leads to death and violence. The story presents us only gruesome details without descriptions of strength from the crowd itself.

Collins' work, therefore, falls into the old Orwellian trap.<sup>10</sup> It is this individualist-humanist representation that reproduces the heroism and individualism of the popular novel that Lukács theorized long ago. In effect, Orwell made it impossible for us to identify with the proles and instead reoriented the popular imagination around a compulsory political identification with order and whoever maintains it. Once again, the popular imagination and the political imagination become inseparable, and the rugged individualism of the popular novel determines what is politically imaginable—no collective struggles, no solidarities, just an inherited sense of loneliness.

Why is a mass uprising described as “chaos?” Why is Katniss a pivotal figure for a people’s insurrection? And why does the event (in this case the riot) never escape a single unified perspective? Is it truly so impossible in popular fiction to imagine what happens after the crowd storms the Capital?<sup>11</sup> On a symptomatic level, this very notion explains why so many Americans could not grasp a national, Black-led, multi-racial uprising against anti-Black police

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<sup>10</sup> Franco “Bifo” Berardi also makes a similar observation about the *Hunger Games* film in his book *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (2017). He states, “In the film, there is, finally, a rebellion that occurs, but it is something sad and hopeless, whose outcome contradicts any idea of possible solidarity among the oppressed” (45).

<sup>11</sup> The recent event known as the Washington D.C. Capitol “insurrection” on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 demonstrates this lack of imagination. Once the crowd was inside the halls of power, they mostly just wandered and sat in empty chairs waiting for their monarch to lead them to the next step of the “revolution.” There they were: multiple generations of those following the Orwellian imagination who participated in the “seizing” of the Capitol. A perfect example of the political outcomes of governed imaginations, this was not an insurrection but an attempt of imposing the same white supremacist order, an effort perfectly compatible with the practices of American democracy and imperialism.

violence in response to George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police in the summer of 2020.<sup>12</sup> One possible answer is that US popular political fiction could not aestheticize such a vision of politics as it is an impossibility for the market-based form of the popular novel because it escapes the bestseller formula. Instead, authors of such fiction rely on either conspiracy theories encompassing every side of the political spectrum or a blind pessimism. Conspiracy theories might appear to lack rationality, but they have just the right amount of reason in them to appeal to a specific flaw in a system or a social contradiction.<sup>13</sup> However, because they only exist within specific pre-established power relations, they are not subversive in relation to the general order itself, only in relation to specific figures within the order. They also play into the mass paranoia of a politically impotent population. Since conspiracy theories function as ideologies that misrepresent real historical conditions, despite the fantastic elements they might contain, in reality they merely reinforce current order. This is what I mean by the Orwellian imagination. There are practically no popular novels that give us the crowd's perspective or any politically imaginative stories that inspire anything other than consumerism, representative politics, or empty signifiers of individual "bravery."<sup>14</sup> Again, all we get is the same reaffirmation of order and the norms for everyday life. In these worlds, "truth" is discovered only through the individual's heroic journey (the psychology of the hero, as Lukács puts it) and his or her ability to lead others, but never through a shared struggle. The dystopias inspired by Orwell's works

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<sup>12</sup> Instead, many jumped to conspiracy theories of police disguised as rioters or painted the movement as a majority of peaceful protesters (in turn denouncing the presence and rage of poor Black youth). It is that appeal to peace and the norm that demonstrates the influence of the Orwellian condition over popular political imagination.

<sup>13</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). As Arendt argues, what defines "ideology" in this conspiratorial mode is precisely its excessive rationality.

<sup>14</sup> There are certainly a few exceptions, some notable examples being Terry Bisson's alternate history of the Civil War and John Brown's insurrection titled *Fire On the Mountain* (1988), Margaret Killjoy's anarchist horror fiction such as *The Lamb Will Slaughter the Lion* (2017), and of course Ursula K. Le Guinn's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and all of her brilliant and influential works of speculative science fiction. But even these few examples do not encompass what the ungovernable novel is, and they possess a cult-like status that seldom reaches the popular imagination.



present us lonely existences that seem to reflect the readers' worlds. If this mirror is correct, then nothing can change, and we must continue waiting for the next brave individual inside of Plato's cave to discover the truth for everyone and lead us. Thankfully, a house of mirrors can be broken. But again, this reflection could also be the limit of the individualization inherent in the formlessness of the novel even if it is crucial to recognize that the Orwellian imagination politicizes these limitations. First, we must reckon with Orwell's legacy in literature, and we must confront the limitations that it places on our ideas of what politics means—eventually raising the question of what a life outside of politics could mean to us.

One way of considering our current predicament would be to argue that the Orwellian imagination has kept us in the Cold War. It offers us a bourgeois dystopia that seems almost inescapable. But abandoning Orwell is not an ideological position. Rather, it is the recognition that the foundations of the Orwellian imagination are rooted in epistemological errors: at best, Orwell merely reaches a point of paradox in his political analyses due to his limited understanding of how states function; at worst, he is a totalitarian in denial. Both options could be true, and they present us even more reason to break down the Orwellian wall that blocks the flow of our political actions. What we lack is a common understanding of what is "possible" today. Our task is tumultuous in this sense. As uprisings continue to spread across the globe, we must develop new ways to understand them and place ourselves inside of them. Fiction as an art opens new life for us, and it gives us new vision. Neither utopian nor dystopian, the ungovernable novel is concerned with living revolt and the historical time of *now*.

### **Escaping Orwell**

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is an expression of Orwell's own totalitarian tendencies, emerging from his personal conflicts with the left and his commitment to English patriotism and British law.

Orwell's authoritarianism explains why *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remains a paradoxical work of literature that provides us a reason to abandon the Orwellian imagination for good. Numerous critics have observed that Orwell's ideological ambiguities and humanist tendencies make *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a perplexing novel that ultimately provides no coherent politics. Although the contradictory tendencies of Orwell's writings have been noted before, continuing to critically engage his text is pertinent to our current political climate. However, we must note that earlier critics of Orwell often failed to read Orwell against Orwell. Instead, they focused on formal questions or presented counter-ideological arguments.<sup>15</sup> I argue instead that reading Orwell against himself is the current task of Orwell criticism.

An archaeological approach to Orwell's writings reveals why *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is simultaneously consistent and in conflict with Orwell's other political works. In this space of discrepancy, his fictional concepts produce an ideology that can prop up both reactionary and progressive political positions—which explains why Orwell can simultaneously be read as a conservative and socialist figure; why approaching Orwell criticism through an opposing ideology is ultimately ineffectual; and why the only possible politics that can be derived from such a confusing framework are conspiracy theories and a defense of the existing order. Ultimately, there is no political imagination to be found in Orwell's world, only fear and paranoia.

Orwell never overcame the orthodoxies of his patriotism (even though he had proclaimed the importance of rejecting ideological orthodoxies), as is evidenced by his shorter political

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<sup>15</sup> See Raymond Williams, *George Orwell*, (1971); Paul Schlueter, "Trends in Orwell Criticism: 1968-1983," *College Literature*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1984, pp. 94–112; and Christopher Norris, *Inside the Myth: Orwell: Views from the Left*, (1984).

essays such as “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius” (1941) and the later work “Writers and Leviathan” (1948). Several critics have noted that the conflicts of Orwell’s political imagination are clearly legible in these texts.<sup>16</sup> A sense of order permeates these texts. Consider, for example, the way Orwell’s commitment to what he calls “the inherent gentleness of the English civilization” (“The Lion” 17) clashes significantly with his fictional depictions of a totalitarian state. A totalitarian state depends precisely upon the perception that it is inherently good since it embodies the natural order—the paradox is quite visible here. Yet, it is also clear that Orwell’s fear of totalitarianism is based on his distrust of other countries and his xenophobia—he simply does not believe that English culture could ever lead to a form of totalitarianism. “Patriotism is usually stronger than class-hatred,” Orwell writes, “and always stronger than any kind of internationalism” (“The Lion” 24). This position is the logical foundation for Orwell’s understanding of a patriotic democratic socialism. He acknowledges class antagonism but chooses to believe that patriotism is a stronger glue for unity.

Orwell is not entirely wrong. However, history has proven that this glue also leaves behind the poisonous residue of nationalism.<sup>17</sup> It makes one wonder how dismayed Orwell might have been if he had lived to see the results of his logic at play in the 2020 Brexit decision. Yet, what is most telling in “The Lion and the Unicorn” is Orwell’s attack on the left and his disillusionment with the proletariat that he still valorizes in earlier pages of the essay. He accuses

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<sup>16</sup> See George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* (1966), Scott Lucas, *The Betrayal of Dissent: Beyond Orwell, Hitchens, and the New American Century* (2004), and John Newsinger, *Hope Lies in the Proles: George Orwell and the Left* (2018).

<sup>17</sup> “By ‘patriotism’ I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, not for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality” (George Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism,” 1945, paragraph 2). Orwell’s perceived differences between these two concepts are dangerously simplistic because they assume a neutrality of the state apparatus while reducing tyranny to a moral choice.

leftist intellectuals of “frightening away” the proletariat with propaganda that taints the idea of a socialist society. To Orwell, the proles are obedient to English law and order, and they are too good to revolt violently. Just like his fictional character O’Brian tells us in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell believes that the proles will not revolt:

A socialist party, which genuinely wished to achieve anything, would have started by facing several facts, which to this day are considered unmentionable in left-wing circles. It would have recognized that England is more united than most countries, that the British workers have a great deal to lose besides their chains, and that the differences in outlook and habits between class and class are rapidly diminishing. In general, it would have recognized that the old-fashioned proletarian revolution is an impossibility. (69)

Orwell’s socialist revolution was to be achieved through the English state apparatus, and it was supposed to set a precedent for other countries to develop their own socialist nations. But what does revolution look like if you have no faith in the working class? Orwell certainly was no materialist dialectician either, as he rejected Marxism. However, it is possible that the fictional concept of “newspeak” was his critical response to the continuous revisions of dialectical materialism (as demonstrated by Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, etc.).<sup>18</sup> Regardless, Orwell’s arguments still position him in a role of authority in a symmetrical conflict between what he perceived as individual freedom and collective tyranny. This fantasy blocks his ability to see beyond not only ideologies he opposes but also the ones he follows. Yet, this blindness exacerbates a tension between individual autonomy and the processes of subjectivation (meaning a nation must create its subjects to be governed). Patriotism and revolution, then, achieve contrary outcomes.

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<sup>18</sup> Throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there are many iterations of newspeak and different theorizations of Ingsoc (English socialism) that seem to reference the ways that the U.S.S.R. rewrote its ideologies during different eras of leadership. It is also noteworthy that the concept of newspeak is a constant negation of speech and concepts.

Orwell's vision of socialism molds the revolution into the framework of the nation and the subject into the citizen.

The symmetrical analysis of revolution that Orwell follows places revolution in a context that totalizes subjects, space, and time.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Orwell's politics leave no room for nuance, transformation, and most importantly, escape from fixities. Perhaps Orwell's hypocrisies are most prevalent when he is trying to defend his earlier positions while also proclaiming their errors, so that he does not lose a particular argument—*Orwell is truly the master of doublespeak.*

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, then, can be understood as an expression of Orwell's authoritarianism in denial. Winston and O'Brien can be seen as representing the two opposing ideological positions that characterize Orwell's own thinking. The once socialist Orwell (Winston) and the authoritarian Orwell (O'Brien) face off against each other during Winston's torture sessions in the Ministry of Love. At one point, O'Brien proclaims: "In our world there will be no emotions except, fear, rage, triumph, and self-abasement. Everything else we shall destroy—everything" (256). O'Brien's words demonstrate not only Orwell's loss of faith in a socialist revolution but also the transformation of Orwell's concepts from "The Lion and the Unicorn" into a purely negative expression of themselves represented through the Party.

In Orwell's anti-communist imagination, every move of the Party is calculated to gain power and to manipulate the population to serve the totalitarian state. But Orwell writes in "The Lion and the Unicorn": "The totalitarian idea that there is no such thing as law, there is only power, has never taken root" (21). Orwell seems to have abandoned this belief by creating the universe of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and by wedding a fiction of communism to a perpetual search

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<sup>19</sup> Kieran Aarons distinguishes between symmetrical revolution and asymmetrical revolt with reference to the late Italian philosopher Furio Jesi's understanding of revolts as "moments of suspended historical time." See "Symposium Introduction: Myth and Politics in Furio Jesi," *Theory & Event*, vol. 22 no. 4, 2019.

for power. It could be argued, then, that Orwell's last novel represents the death of the socialist Orwell. His socialism was eclipsed by his totalitarian imagination, as he theorized a state apparatus of pure terror. *The terror for Orwell was always the loss of the law.*

Yet, it is Orwell who dreams up what would become a never-ending nightmare. Everywhere we look, we find the specter of totalitarianism and conspiracy—the apparition of Big Brother. Although according to Orwell himself it cannot ever come fully into existence, the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* nevertheless keeps haunting our political imagination. Throughout the novel, Orwell grappled with and destroyed whatever faith in the proletariat (and in turn the socialist revolution) had lingered in his heart. Yet, he could not resist the compulsion to continue romanticizing the working class (as a revolutionary subject). Winston proclaims: “If there was hope it must lie in the proles.” But Orwell quickly negates this statement with O’Brian’s words: “The proletarians will never revolt, not in a thousand years or a million. They cannot. I do not have to tell you the reason; you know it already” (251). Let us not ignore the presupposition to which Orwell gives voice through O’Brian.

Orwell expressed in “The Lion and the Unicorn” his belief that the proles are too good to break the law and that violent insurrection will not be how the English working class would come to power. For Orwell, nothing exists outside the law, just as for O’Brian nothing exists outside the Party. In a way, both Winston and O’Brian are correct. The proles, in Orwell’s mind, represent the hopes of English decency. As a result, they will not revolt because they will not break the law. But this is not true: there is no law in the Prole’s city. So, what Orwell really means is that they will not disobey the Party, which Orwell defines in his fictional universe as the rule of law. The paradox he has created is twofold: Orwell despises the ungovernable way of

life that proles inhabit, and he wants to save them from it; but he also romanticizes their simple way of life and cannot let go of hopes that they become conscious.

### **A Problem with the Revolutionary Subject**

We must understand that Orwell's political imagination exists as a vacuous force of totality, and it relies on anticipations of rigid categorizations of life. The continual flows of power do not register in his political analysis, nor does any kind of productive spontaneity, and this is where the shallowness of his humanism and bourgeois individualism reveals itself. Second, it is crucial to keep in mind while interrogating his texts that Orwell is a product of his historical moment. At the heart of his politics we can find the familiar desire to identify a revolutionary subject—his aforementioned fetishization of the proles. Orwell was not alone in this obsession, as it has not disappeared from political discourse even today. The problem we need to address here is that the very notion of a revolutionary subject individualizes shared communal struggles, imposes identity, and limits the scope of what is possible for various forms of life. Moreover, with the formlessness of the novel and the tendency of anti-communist fiction toward propaganda, collective struggle is cast aside in favor of a conspiracy against the hero.

Both issues (the reduction of life to rigid categories and the obsession with the revolutionary subject) have been addressed by political theorists since Orwell's times. In the French Marxist tradition (beginning with Louis Althusser), we can easily identify the groundworks of a theory that sought to think beyond notions of the subject by creating a more fluid ontology that broke with some of the metaphysical rigidity of classic Marxism. Althusser famously quipped, "If we never were structuralists, we can now explain why: why we seemed to be, even though we were not, why there came about this strange misunderstanding on the basis of which books were written. We were guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion:

we were Spinozists” (*Essays in Self Criticism* 132). It was this impulse that opened the flow of the Spinozan current into post-Marxism.

Etienne Balibar, a French Marxist theorist and student of Althusser, continued the post-Marxist/Spinoza connection in an essay titled “Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: Fear of the Masses.” Using a Spinozist framework, Balibar declares that the world invented by Orwell is ontologically impossible. Balibar presents Spinoza’s philosophy of the masses (multitude), language, and ethics as an example of a new political framework. In Spinozan ethics, all language, ideas, and actions are practiced collectively. In other words, no idea or action exists in a vacuum. Balibar quotes Spinoza: “Neither the Cartesian nor empiricist ‘subject,’ but the process or the network of the circulation of affects and ideas” (Balibar 33). Drawing from a Spinozan framework, Balibar states, “By showing that individuality and the multitude are inseparable,” he continues, “Spinoza shows also in advance the absurdity of theories of ‘totalitarianism,’ which see in mass movements only the figure of a radical historical evil” (37).

According to such a view, the interconnectivity among all forms of life, comprising all movement and thought, cannot fall into absolute control of a state apparatus. Orwell’s world cannot exist, as language, thought, and action will always play freely (even under repression). While it is not possible to summarize the entire French post-Marxist (or Italian Marxist) schools of thought that embraced Spinoza in this essay, this philosophical lineage clearly established an anti-Orwellian contemporary discourse that goes against the notion of the subject.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>It is important to include Antonio Negri’s contribution to Spinozan philosophy and the Italian school of thought that embraced Spinoza. See his *The Savage Anomaly* (1991) and *Spinoza For Our Time* (2013). For a detailed summary of French Post-Marxism see the second half of Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (1997).



But it is beyond this Althusserian Spinozist lineage that we arrive at the idea of the ungovernable. The word *ungovernable* resists the Orwellian imagination; as such, it can help us move away from this tradition. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's work has been instrumental in developing useful ways of understanding ongoing revolts with what he refers to as a "destituent potential."<sup>21</sup>

### **Deactivating the Novel as Apparatus**

Orwell's fictions work against revealing the ungovernable, and they are ontologically opposed to revolution because of the force of law that Orwell defends. In other words, a different literary relationship between mythos and revolt needs to be established, and stories that create tensions between definitions of order and chaos must begin to fill our imaginations. The task at hand is to reorient our vision to the chaos of the event—namely, the riot.

To begin, the ungovernable is a form of life and not a subject position. Agamben first introduced this term in his short essay "What is an Apparatus?" (2009) where he expands the scope of Michel Foucault's biopolitical concept of the apparatus (*dispositif*) into all areas of life. An apparatus captures what he calls "forms-of life." Agamben writes: "The problem of the profanation of apparatuses—that is to say, the restitution to common use of what has been captured and separated in them—is, for this reason, all the more urgent." He continues, "But this problem cannot be properly raised as long as those who are concerned with it are unable to intervene in their own processes of subjectification, any more than in their own apparatuses"

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<sup>21</sup> For example, the French collective The Invisible Committee has written at length about a destituent power visible in contemporary revolts. See: The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends* (2014), and The Invisible Committee, *Now* (2018). Italian philosopher Marcello Tari also has a forthcoming book in translation titled *There is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution* that focuses on the concept. An emerging field of destituent studies is also beginning to grow in popularity. See the following website: <https://destituentcommons.com/>

(24). It is here that he makes the claim that the ungovernable emerges as the “beginning and, at the same time, the vanishing point of every politics” (24).

Agamben’s philosophical gesture urges us to intervene in our own processes of subjectification. This means that we must work to reject whatever seeks to interpellate us or manage our bodies into a codifiable system in order to free us from the multiplicity of apparatuses in our lives. What is ungovernable is the coming together of the forms of life that are made visible only through gestures and affections (not one shared identity or explained feeling). In other words, ungovernability is precisely the shared loss of what existed before the naming of our identities. It is what becomes possible when life is freed from the apparatus of subjectivity. What does this mean? On the one hand, there is a need to liberate life from domination, which is a typical response to systemic forms of oppression (in line with previous post-Marxist thought). On the other hand, all forms of subjectivity function as forms of capture. To be ungovernable means to flee subjectivity, to resist forming bonds embedded in subject positions, and to build relationships that destroy the sociality of power. It consists of undoing the work that power has done to impose itself on all bodies and finding ways to evade power’s influence on naming the subject itself (the naming of a revolutionary subject falls into this trap). What pushes Agamben’s philosophy beyond the limitations of the post-Marxist position is the notion of the active self-deconstruction of each form of subjectivity. The “profanation of apparatuses” amounts to breaking them apart in order to liberate the potentials that remained inactive in them, thereby allowing for a different use of what was trapped in these apparatuses (*Use of Bodies* 273). In other words, the forms of life or singularities are ontologically transformed and given the ability to exist freely as what he calls “whatever singularities” or sometimes referred to as “universal singularities.”

With these ideas in mind, in conversation with Agamben's philosophy, it is now possible to approach the idea of communism in a way that was not possible for Orwell. In this new sense, communism could be defined as life in common, where the concept of community is not bound to an economic system (be it capitalist or communist). Neither a state apparatus nor an economic system, communism is the proliferation of autonomous forms of shared life based on the rejection of any management. It is this vision of a life in common that allows us to provide an ontological definition of the ungovernable. We are also inhabiting a tension between both Bakhtin and Lukács because there is a being homeless together that "becoming ungovernable" implies. But, at this point, a new question emerges: *How can insurrections create ungovernable bodies?* Before this question can be answered, first we must understand some identifiable characteristics of ungovernability in both global revolt and literature.

The ungovernable are present in every class and exist to betray every class form. They become visible in the "Be water" slogan of Hong Kong rebels, the occupations of roundabouts in Paris by the Yellow Vests, and the subway fare evaders in Chile—together they form a global force that rejects the centralization of power. In other words, the ungovernable are precisely everything that Orwell could not imagine in the proles—a multiplicity of different singularities.

To "become ungovernable," therefore, is a gesture that is replicated and multiplied as each revolt erupts autonomously but in relation to a shared uncontrollability. The term "gesture" implies an idea or ethic communicated through physical movements. Agamben writes, "The gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability. It has nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality" (*Means without End* 58-9). A gesture *shows all and tells nothing*. It is the form of life that emerges in revolt and in daily life when antagonism is revealed.

We cannot all be present for the riot, but we must understand its composition and its gestures as a culture if we are to see revolutionary movements develop further. Agamben's philosophy helps us to reorient our perceptions to what we have been told is "chaos" and to see instead the beauty of multiplicities coming together against order that keeps them in subjectivity. Therefore, an ungovernable novel is the medium that allows an escape from pure individualist representation that introduces a multiplicity of voices through its narrative. This is the exact opposite of the Orwellian novel and its governable imagination born within the individualist nature of the novel itself. To gesture back to Bakhtin and Lukács, there is a formlessness but also a collective consciousness that the ungovernable novel demonstrates—being homeless together but sharing this realization. As I argued earlier, Rachel Kushner's novel *The Flamethrowers* is a rich text that demonstrates this point quite clearly.

### **Kushner, Crowds, and Riots**

*The Flamethrowers* encapsulates the central ideas (the refusal of work, political representation, social management, and civility) that were characteristic of the Italian revolutionary moment known as "Autonomia, 1977." However, these elements are also mirrored through Kushner's fictional narrative in a way that overcomes the solitary confinement of traditional novels. What do I mean by this? The key ungovernable element of Kushner's collective narrative is what many have condemned as its "silent narrator." Many critics have frowned upon this narrative device and have claimed it has taken agency away from the protagonist (Kushner intentionally never fully identified the narrator who is nicknamed "Reno").<sup>22</sup> She (Reno) has her own thoughts, but she does not take the center stage in the narrative.

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<sup>22</sup> Most of Kushner's critics in the United States could not see past both the "silent narrator" or the romance between characters, and the political potential of the novel has largely been misunderstood. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/books/review/rachel-kushners-flamethrowers.html>, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/23/flamethrowers-rachel-kushner-review>, and

In an interview with *The Believer*, Kushner responds to this criticism of her work when she pushes back against the charge that Reno's character has no "agency": "Sure—maybe it'll be the case that some people will be disappointed by her so-called lack of agency, and my rebuttal would be that maybe those peoples' expectations have to do with literary conventions of heroism more than with real life situations that young women face" (2). Kushner is obviously working against the gendered individualist-humanist formula of the popular novel. The ungovernable novel works against becoming stuck in fixed forms of representation (or formulas) that reproduce the same individualist narrative that the Orwellian imagination champions. Furthermore, I also argue that the narrative in Kushner's writing should not be our primary focus. Most of the mainstream reception of Kushner's novel focused on the romantic plot elements as well as the motifs related to what we could call the novel's motorcycle and racing aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> All of these are elements of the popular novel, and I argue that we are missing something important by focusing too much on these narrative devices. Instead, it is the depictions of various moments of social rupture that make *The Flamethrowers* an ungovernable novel.<sup>24</sup> The Event is always a matter of corporeal rupture, whether through language or reality. In Kushner's work, the riot *is* the rupture. It is where all shared affectivity erupts either in flows of bodies or in streams of memories and concepts.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/08/youth-in-revolt>.

<sup>23</sup> See Christina García, "Revolutions Per Minute, Rachel Kushner's *Flamethrowers*," *New York Times* (2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/books/review/rachel-kushners-flamethrowers.html>; and Maud Newton, "Racing From Art To Revolution And Back Again In 'The Flamethrowers'," NPR (2013), <https://www.npr.org/2013/04/04/175351776/racing-from-art-to-revolution-and-back-again-in-the-flamethrowers>.

<sup>24</sup> Literary scholars have not explored this aspect of Kushner's novel. I chose *The Flamethrowers* as an example of the ungovernable for this reason. There is potential in the novel to reimagine what becomes possible in moments of revolt and how on a sensorial level to engage with such experiences. The examples of rioting in Rome and New York City in the book demonstrate how we can begin to reimagine a living politics.

Up to chapter fifteen, Reno floats between groups and people and relationships established through her status as an individual. Reno is immersed in the New York art scene of the 1970s as she is exposed to the life of the extremely wealthy Valera family. A few chapters take place in a different timeline in the voice of Ettore Valera, Sandro's grandfather. Those chapters create a context for the overall Italian history and the Valera family's class status as well as their historical association with fascism. But the composition of groups in the story changes after she breaks off her relationship with Sandro and leaves the Valera family behind while visiting Italy.

Reno finds herself with Gianni (the Valera family's gardener) and is thrust into Italy's Autonomia moment of 1977. It is at this point that we can begin our analysis of the way Kushner's writing presents us with an example of the ungovernable novel. In the follow passage, Reno finds herself in a random apartment with some young people who she learns are involved in the movement. Reno observes the scene: "The people in the apartment had been kind to me the previous night. There was something about them I could only describe as human. Humane. They didn't ask who I was or why I was there, where I came from, what I did. One didn't present credentials with these people, like in New York" (270). Immediately, in this chapter Reno starts to ponder questions about space and bodies. She had passively listened to guests at dinner parties and kept her thoughts to herself. But in contrast to the Valera family (with whom she had just spent extended time), these young revolutionaries present her with a different view of the world.

The following day a demonstration takes place. This scene shows exactly *how* Kushner imagines the presence of crowds. Up to this point in the novel, Reno's "silence" has allowed a multiplicity of voices to speak. Moreover, most of the dialogue in *The Flamethrowers* takes place in bars and art galleries, at dinner parties, and of course during riots. This is a significant

detail because those are all shared spaces, where every character's voice is channeled through Reno for narrative purposes. However, at the riot we see a politics of whatever singularities emerge—we are given a taste of the ungovernable.

In her mind, Reno repeatedly asks, “how do we find each other?” as more people begin to fill space in the square, and suddenly her world is reoriented: “the world was people, which made the prospect of two finding each other more desolate” (277). The scene's tension grows as various groups arrive, and the carabinieri (police) begin to escalate things. The riot has not revealed itself as the event yet, but its anticipation underwrites each line.

Kushner puts us into the riot, but not in the way the Orwellian imagination would. Instead, we can negotiate ourselves into its fabric, as Reno does with the feminist contingent of the march. Reno, still distraught by how her relationship with Sandro had ended, begins to recount all the moments men had manipulated her and pieces together all the inconsistencies. Finally, while being pushed into the crowd, she has an epiphany: “Watching these women with their bullhorns shouting, ‘You’ll pay for everything!’, I took their rage and negotiated myself into its fabric. I fused my sadness over something private to the chorus of their public lament” (279). This is an example of how Kushner breaks open the apparatus of the novel and allows new life to proliferate. This moment demonstrates what is possible when the separation between the “public” and “private” becomes ruptured and new possibilities emerge that bring our struggles together. It is very fitting that this is the moment when the riot erupts. In his book *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict*, Phil Neel describes this moment in the following terms: “Anyone who has been in such a crowd can feel the power there, the strange new logics that emerge when so many bodies are pushed together against the police and the absolutely terrifying multiplication of violence made possible in such moments” (12). In

Kushner's novel, these potentialities are demonstrated as the crowd begins picking up pace and pushing past lines of carabinieri.

On the surface, Kushner describes a scene of “chaos” as a bus is flipped and set on fire and college students begin pulling up paving stones and throwing them (280). Yet, there is something very different happening here from what the Orwellian imagination is used to. Kushner reorients our imagination from chaos to joy. As the windows of expensive boutiques are methodically smashed, looting begins—but the experience is not scary for Reno:

I heard the crash of breaking glass, “Expropriate! Expropriate!” Three kids with painted faces came running past clutching fur coats, the war paint on their cheeks dripping down, sweat and rain smeared stacks of furs over their arms like midtown Manhattan coat-check clerks. “Furs for the people!” Plastic hangers dropping behind them as they ran. (280)

The playfulness in this scene continues as Reno recalls a conversation with an eight-year-old Italian boy about how Moka bombs made from espresso makers were “easier to run with” instead of normal Molotov cocktails (281). All ages, genders, and races are throwing incendiary devices, building barricades, breaking windows, and looting. Everyone works together, and, suddenly, the disciplinary mode of the novel is deactivated—the novel as apparatus is no more and instead a free play of forms of life becomes possible. This is the anti-Orwellian gesture. It is this gesture that allows Kushner to communicate the anti-work, anti-police, and anti-management message of the ungovernability of Italian Autonomia. Bodies were free, space was free, and things were free. Kushner writes her work in a way that destitutes the disciplinary apparatus that a popular novel becomes—a mouthpiece for social morality. Instead, the story demonstrates how the city can be inhabited differently *together*.



Moreover, what separates the social rupture from the narrative is the latter's ability to become more than just a story. Instead, it is the rupture that takes place in both the story and the reader that turns the novel into a source of destituent potential. What is being learned? And how will the reader expand their own ideas for rebellion? In other words, how will the novel's events attach themselves to life and material conditions? The imagination breaks the barrier of the pre-negotiated space that Orwellian concepts have propped up. The narratives continue with the characters changed by the event and the reader continues with a rupture introduced into their perception of things. Ila Rowner has argued that for the corporeality of a literary event to be understood, there must be a "vital move." I would like to posit that this is precisely what Kushner is doing with her novel. Rowner, drawing on Gilles Deleuze's idea of immanence, writes:

First, one has to convert the discursive signs that appear to constitute the activity of man's reading and writing into a map of corporeal entities and relations. Second, through these quantitative corporeal measures, one has to take the risk of approaching the work's qualitative becoming (the virtual of the actual, the incorporeal of the corporeal). Finally one has to experience the immense stream of life through the text, with the purpose of recognizing the work's law of transformation, the work's engagement in the future offspring of the event. Such a reading promises a mythology of happenings, events that have already occurred and yet are still to come. (196)

For Deleuze (and Rowner), immanence means that the text influences the body, and the body influences the text—there is no inside or outside, only a field of immanence. Deleuze's theory of the event emphasizes that language is the event. Kushner has achieved this with her novel by placing herself in suspended time between her historical moment and the event of '77 Italy. *The*

*Flamethrowers* offers a force of thought to the reader: “it is both the force that affects and that is affected” (Zourabichvili 70). In other words, Kushner offers a framework for writing the fiction of revolt and future revolts that takes the formlessness of the novel and puts it into a messianic historic relation—the past, present, and future of revolts are situated in the imagination of now.

Paradoxically, the promise of future revolutions, societies, and technologies still reeks of the Orwellian mindset. Kushner teaches us to avoid this paradox by drawing inspiration from what has happened or what is happening (or by linking two events together). Kushner is taking the novel, drawing a line of continuity between previous and ongoing revolts, and writing ideas that interact with potentialities of the body. The bodily relationship to the text is crucial. To return to Orwell one last time, let us experiment with the destituent potential that is found in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Early in the story, Winston has a dream about Julia:

What overwhelmed him in that instant was admiration for the gesture with which she had thrown her clothes aside. With its grace and carelessness it seemed to annihilate a whole culture, a whole system of thought, as through Big Brother and the Party and the Thought Police could all be swept into nothingness by a single splendid movement of the arm.

(30)

This is arguably the most ungovernable moment in the novel. Julia’s gesture had the potential to be replicated into more rebellions, if only Orwell had acknowledged the opportunity. While the ungovernable cannot be reduced to one single bodily formation, it is always bodily gestures that reveal it. Such gestures could be a riot, or Julia’s gesture of throwing off her clothes in Orwell’s case. Julia’s character also demonstrates what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have termed “the Undercommons.” She uses her position to steal or purchase illegal and forbidden items (although we find that Orwell did not see freedom beyond the commodity). Winston’s observation about

Julia underscores her mentality: “Any kind of organized revolt against the Party, which was bound to be a failure, struck her as stupid. The clever thing was to break the rules and stay alive all the same” (125). Orwell does not show much admiration for such tactics or forms of rebellion. However, a destituent power lies in performing acts of evasion and reappropriation. The fetishized revolutionary climax does not have to occur in an ungovernable novel. A riot is not a revolution but a moment of rupture. The same can be said about breaking the law. No world has to constitute itself; no one has to win; and no one has to lose—but *something* must happen. In the dystopian novel, nothing is allowed to happen. Nonetheless, Orwell’s fiction and any fiction that develops from his framework cannot make use of such potentials.

In this context, it becomes quite relevant that Kushner was influenced by the works of the Italian writer Nanni Balestrini to such an extent that she based one of her characters in *The Flamethrowers* on his life.<sup>25</sup> Balestrini participated in the days of Autonomia and his works drew inspiration from those experiences. The punchy style she uses when describing the scenes of the riots is borrowed from his writing style, and Kushner’s work has arguably been one of the key reasons why his novels have acquired a cult status in the US. Furthermore, Kushner was also inspired by the collective voices of narration in Balestrini’s work. His two most notable works, *We Want Everything* and *The Unseen*, both focus on collective characters. A collective character in a novel could be understood as a nameless narrator and protagonist. The individual characters themselves do not take precedence over the event or what is happening—a fiction of whatever singularities. In a 2016 interview Kushner did with Balestrini, the latter has the following to say:

*We Want Everything* is the story of a real person, Alfonso; he told me everything that’s in the book. He is a collective character, in the sense that in those years, thousands of people

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<sup>25</sup> The Italian revolutionary in *The Flamethrowers*, Gianni, and his scheme of skiing across the border to France are based directly on Balestrini’s real life events.

like him experienced the same things and had the same ideas and the same behaviors. It's for this reason that he has no name in the book. I am interested in collective characters like the protagonist in *The Unseen*. I think that unlike what happens in the bourgeois novel—which is based on the individual and his personal struggle within a society—the collective character struggles politically, together with others like him, in order to transform society. Thus his own story becomes an epic story.<sup>26</sup>

This approach is drastically different from most political novels in the US. The autonomous movement of workers and students in Italy has helped to shape global contemporary political struggles. If we are talking of the “future of politics,” this future should draw inspiration from those same struggles. It is not a coincidence that Kushner began writing *The Flamethrowers* shortly after the Occupy Wall Street Movement began in 2011:

As I was writing the book, *Autonomia* and the Movement of '77 started to seem like something of a cultural zeitgeist. A lot of people were interested in Italy, and that's partly because of Occupy and other movements that were going on. Even people in the Arab movements were looking to Italy, and people in the anti-austerity movements across Europe. It's a really interesting time that hasn't completely been studied and declared defunct in the way that May '68 has. The Italian 1970s may have more interesting and relevant links to the contemporary era, given that the autonomist actions extended beyond the factory into the cities and were a set of refusals that no longer cohered with the factory and a traditionally Marxist class composition. Beyond the complicated issue of *Autonomia*, there were these rather simple coherences between what I wrote and what

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<sup>26</sup> See full interview: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/i-am-interested-in-collective-characters-an-interview-with-nanni-balestrini/>.

was going on in real life. As I wrote about the blackout in 1977, looting was erupting in London. As I wrote about people being tear-gassed in the streets of Rome that same year, people were being tear-gassed in Oakland.<sup>27</sup>

In chapter eighteen of *The Flamethrowers*, titled “Behind the Green Door,” Kushner describes the blackout of 1977 in New York City. Kushner demonstrates the same playfulness and displays of collective power that she depicts in the previous riot scene. This scene enables Kushner to reveal to the reader connections between revolt and everyday life (there does not have to be a political demonstration for revolt to emerge). Reno walks out of a theatre during the blackout and hears a commotion: “Merry Christmas Motherfuckers!” a man shouts as store windows are shattered (348). Kushner deactivates the law in these scenes, offering no power to the law or economy. As she describes the short “whoop” of a police siren, she observes that “there was something impotent about it, that single short whoop” (349). There is no forced morality or appeal to order as in Orwell’s novels. Instead, she reorients us again to see the intersections between poor youth in Italy smashing stores and a multi-racial poor smashing various shopping districts in New York City. Kushner forces readers to reimagine scenes of “chaos” as moments of spontaneity and the coming-together of the oppressed into an eruption of their power. This framing of the narrative negates the ill-informed idea that looting is a non-political or senseless act of destruction. Kushner makes it very clear that this event has purpose as Reno states, “People knew what they were doing. Like they’d been waiting for the lights to go out” (349).

This description helps the reader accept the existence of events that serve no purpose in the existing order. *The Flamethrowers*, presenting us with the potentialities of the ungovernable

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<sup>27</sup> See full interview: <https://www.neworleansreview.org/rachel-kushner-im-not-sure-there-is-a-clear-distinction-between-to-communicate-and-to-monologue/>.

novel, breaks the narrative out of the existing order. As Reno reflects on the event, she observes: “You had to believe in the system, I thought, to feel it was wrong to take things without paying for them.” Reno offers more commentary to turn this moment in the narrative into something politically transformative for the reader:

Looting wasn't stealing, or shopping by other means. It was declaration, one I understood, watching the juicer crash through the window: the system is in “off” mode. And in “off” mode, there was no private property, no difference between Burger King and Alvin's Television Repair. Everything previously hoarded behind steel glass was up for grabs. (349)

In both scenes (the riot scene in Italy and the blackout scene in NYC), the proles have the power. But they are not limited anymore: they have become ungovernable. An ungovernable novel allows us to attune our imaginations in order to recognize the politics of global revolt and encounter a shared sense of struggle. The heroism and individualist-humanist identities that have become so prevalent in literature are relics of a totalitarian imagination. Kushner's work presents a challenge to future writers of political fiction. How do we write about the riot and the crowd? We must first learn to deactivate the novel as an apparatus and reveal the forms of life that exist as different whatever singularities within them. The separation between writers and revolutionaries also must be overcome by abolishing these categories and to seek a life in common (where an economic relationship does not determine form). Lastly, our writing must give this multiplicity the power to tear down the non-fictional laws imposed on fictional worlds and the power to inspire new potentialities for our historical moment—to inspire new visions of life in common. Only then will Orwell's law imposed on our imagination finally be broken. Problems between form and content cannot be easily overcome. Yet, relying on Lukács' and

Bakhtin's formulations and contemporary theorizations of ungovernability, we might be able to reveal a new historical consciousness and a timeless unfinalizability (in a Bakhtinian sense). Such an articulation could allow us to reconceive the novel in relation to contemporary revolts as material conditions continue to change and a collective struggle becomes a necessity. Perhaps, the ungovernable novel is not a homeless becoming after all but a return to a home called communism.

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