Insularity Now Here and Nowhere: Private Circles and Utopian Isles

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Abstract: This paper opposes two versions of insularity: the first is the linkage between utopian political imaginings and island spaces, which contributes to a negative view of utopia as a self-enclosed, totalitarian state; the second is the wide-spread dream of the private home as the realm of a happy life – the 'realistic' direction visions of a better future tend to take in contemporary Western societies, also an insular concept. The paper then suggests a possibility of utopian politics beyond both of these forms of insularity – the isolated island as a detached vision of a political ideal as well as the insular refuge of private withdrawal –, a politics opposed to the existing 'partitions' (Rancière) within the current social order. As an example, the final part of the paper discusses a utopian political approach in this sense to the issue of 'economic migration'.

Utopian thought is closely linked to notions of insularity in the Western tradition. In this context, the insular now often appears as an image of negative detachment and enclosure and as a reason for the rejection of utopian ideas. At the same time, insular concepts characterise those visions of a positive future which are most widely accepted in Western societies today: visions of individual happiness located in the private realm. This paper attempts an inter-, or rather anti-disciplinary exploration of these connections between insularity and notions of a better future. I am thus leaving the island of my academic discipline, German studies, and aim to eschew other safe havens of academic disciplinarity, or insularity, in the sense of diverging from those concepts of specialisation and academic 'independence' which are in fact a depoliticisation of one's own po-

sition as well as of the topics approached.[1] An insistence on clearly marked boundaries of academic discourses often entails a refusal to engage with the conditions of the production of knowledge within the current socio-political and economic system. In this way, a seemingly scientific 'neutrality' and avoidance of political involvement distorts the realities of academic research in its societal contexts and conveniently serves to contain the reach of inquiry within the established 'partitions'[2] of the existing social order.[3] The attempt to leave well-charted disciplinary domains, then, is a possible starting point for an exploration of utopian political alternatives, for a journey to *nowhere*, which is, of course, one meaning of the term utopia derived from the Greek words οὐ and τόπος, *no place* or *non-place*, together with the second meaning εὖ τόπος, a *good place*. Via a retranslation into English, a third layer of meaning becomes possible: *nowhere* can be split into the words *now here*. This pun hints at two aspects of utopian thought: its function as an indirect critique of the present and the utopian desire for its ideas to materialise now here. At the moment, however, nowhere seems to be the prevalent meaning of utopia: with the so-called 'end of socialism', utopian concepts have supposedly been sent back to the no-place where they belong. In such negative views, it is common to equate political utopianism and totalitarianism. Whilst this is a problematic generalisation in terms of interpreting history – because it misses the point of many historical utopian visions and is misleading as far as the purportedly utopian bases of totalitarian regimes are concerned –, it is also problematic in relation to the future, which is the focus of this paper. I will start by discussing negative notions of utopia as connected to insularity, then turn to forms of insularity now here; in the last two parts, I will attempt to sketch possibilities of utopian thought beyond the concept of the self-enclosed island, employing the political theory of Jacques Rancière and looking at the issue of migration as a concrete example.

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[1] Obviously, this critique of 'disciplinarity' does not pertain to the use of academic specialisation as a – potentially subversive – strategy of "critical distance" (as for example discussed in Callus, Ivan: In Praise of Insularity: Tone, Autonomy and Critical Practice. In this volume, p. 31–42, here p. 36f.).

[2] Cf. below for this notion in the theory of Jacques Rancière.

[3] The current demand on the arts to have an 'impact' on society can be seen as an ironic inversion of the anti-disciplinarity sketched here: in such discourses, 'impact' is clearly not meant to shake up the political status quo.

INSULAR UTOPIAS

The connection between the island and imaginings of a better socio-political world is unfavourable if it emphasises the absolute nature of utopian constructs in the original sense of absolute as 'detached'. Indeed, Morus's Utopia is an artificial island, separated from the mainland by removing a natural connection.[4] Whilst this act of separation symbolises the positive idea of creating something radically new, this insular concept of utopia has also helped to establish its bad reputation as a self-enclosed totality.[5] Utopia is paradigmatically seen as a state resulting from total planning and cutting all ties with existing orders and previous developments. It thereby also forms an island in time, so to speak, which contributes to its negative perception as an unrealistic separation from historical conditions. An epitome of such a utopian political state is the insular city rationally planned and fortified. These visions of socio-political as well as architectural and technological planning are often imagined as eventually creating dystopias of total control and surveillance, suppressing individual difference, freedom and change, and shutting off communication with the outside world.

Whilst the emphasis of utopian imaginings often lies on artificial construction, there are also versions of island utopias linked to the opposite: paradisal ideas of going 'back to nature'. An example of this, which can be related to the issues discussed here, is the failure of an island utopia traced in the 2012 novel *Imperium* by Christian Kracht.[6] Kracht's protagonist advocates a return to nature based on an exclusive diet of coconuts. Herein, a further form of insular utopianism is depicted ironically: such claims to have identified the one cure for all ills can be found in the more esoteric variations of utopianism. At the same time, Kracht also hints satirically at a current, relatively popular movement of social change focusing on *Ethical Eating* – to quote the title of a book from 2010[7] –, where the crucial point seems to be the individual choice of the right diet. More generally, Kracht explores the notion of utopia in its connection to the island as its *topos*, as a self-contained and rigid system. The solipsistic nature of the protagonist's utopian ideal is emphasised symbolically in many ways, for instance when the protagonist ends up eating his own

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[4] Cf. Morus, Thomas: Utopia. Trans. Ignaz Emanuel Wessely. München: M. Ernst 1896, p. 69.

[5] Cf. Jameson, Fredric: Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future. In: Gordin, Michael D. et al. (eds.): Utopia/Dystopia. Conditions of Historical Possibility. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010, p. 21–44, here p. 25.

[6] See also Bauer, Karin: Staging Utopian Insularity: The End of Empire in Christian Kracht's *Imperium*. In this volume, p.167–176.

[7] Duve, Karen: Anständig Essen. Ein Selbstversuch. Berlin: Galiani 2010. My translation, K.S.

thumbs: This auto-cannibalistic act is a strong symbol of solipsistic narcissism, as well as of the utopian notion of autarchy gone wild. Throughout the novel, Kracht creates an atmosphere of disgust and fascination with the insular utopia he depicts. This mixture of attraction and repulsion can be seen as a paradigmatic reaction to utopian constructs. Such ambivalent responses may have to do with an uncanny closeness of utopian visions to our own world – the *now here* hidden in the *nowhere*.

INSULARITY NOW HERE: PRIVATE CIRCLES

A critique of utopia is necessarily complemented by a view of existing reality and apparently realistic options for its future. This appears *ex negativo* in those traits which are seen as lacking in utopia: what is implicit in the critical views of utopian thought I have sketched is a notion of existing societies as non-insular spaces of flexible development and open interchange between free individuals, supposedly not solipsistic narcissists. Quite obviously, this is itself an idealised version of reality and it sums up the dominant legitimising ideology of liberalism. Slavoj Žižek, amongst others, has argued how the global order of liberalism together with its self-justifying discourses has in fact acquired those traits of totalitarian utopia which it seemingly rejects: by this very rejection, it excludes all other options and becomes the self-enclosed, rigid system it is supposed to contradict.[8] The wide-spread prejudice against utopian visions brings about a closing off in view of future possibilities for a better sociopolitical reality. It seems almost inadmissible, for instance, to imagine a happier society. Just combining these two words, 'happy' and 'society', is likely to evoke images of a *Brave New World* of fake and superficial collective happiness since predominant discourse connects happiness not only to the individual as its obvious subject but also to the private sphere as its only realm.[9] 'Utopian' conceptions in the sense of plans for creating *a good place* in the future are equally limited to the private.[10] This is, obviously, also a form of insular utopia: the ideal home, whose real location can be a humble abode as well as, for instance, a privately owned island.

The idea of the island utopia, then, is not the absolute other of predominant dreams of a better life. Kracht hints at this when the anti-

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[8] Cf. Žižek, Slavoj: Auf verlorenem Posten. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2009, p. 60.

[9] For an opposed concept of "public, political happiness" see Arendt, Hannah: On Revolution. London: Penguin 1990, here p. 131.

[10] Cf. Thompson, Peter: Introduction: The Privatization of Hope and the Crisis of Negation. In: Thompson, Peter/Žižek, Slavoj (eds.): The Privatization of Hope. Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia. Durham/London: Duke University Press 2013, p. 1–20, here p. 5.

capitalist hero of his novel – which is set in the early 20th century – buys his utopian island within the German colonies and tries to sell his ideal product of coconut oil, employing the indigenous inhabitants of 'his' island in the process. His utopia, thus, perpetuates conditions of colonialism, exploitation, and capitalist dependencies. Whilst this can be read as a cynical satire of utopianism in general, it may also be seen as a more specific critique of those kinds of utopian projects which are closely connected to self-enclosed private spaces.[11] When Kracht's protagonist settles on 'his' island and builds his own hut, his materialised dream very much resembles the private utopia of a comfortable home.[12] In this aspect, the island utopia Kracht describes turns into a rather mundane, bourgeois dream of private happiness.

As I have argued, this is, indeed, the predominant form the utopian idea of creating a better future assumes today. With the denigration of more wide-ranging utopian concepts, it is the remaining possibility for visions of a *good place*. With a pun on well-known brand names, this is a *YouTopia* or *iTopia* connected to private possession,[13] even in its more ascetic ecological versions. In capitalist societies, the private is, in fact, – contrary to its connotations of a secluded and sheltered space outside of society at large – the dimension which dominates social interactions, not only amongst families and friends, but much more widely, since the world of work and trade is also one of private economic agents. Insular interests, thus, structure society. Therefore, Robinson Crusoe's solitary struggle for an autarchic island life can be seen as paradigmatic of capitalist economy.[14] These kinds of insular, individual and private utopias are – apparently – a liberalist counterimage to the rejected collective but self-enclosed and totalitarian insularity of political utopias. But the private conception of happiness itself leads to closed off, segregated communities: an epitome of these today are gated communities for the rich within cities. Furthermore, according to Jacques Rancière, whose theories I will turn to in the following section, the general function of what is currently defined as politics is precisely to establish and maintain spatial, material and social partitions,[15] or the various insularities within society. In Rancière's analysis, existing

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[11] As the movements for ethical eating mentioned above are and also, more generally, popular advocations of social change through ethical and environmentally-aware consumption.

[12] Cf. Kracht, Christian: Imperium. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 2012, p. 120.

[13] This of course also hints at the *myspace* of a virtual 'public', which mainly consists of projections of private happiness and success, a coexistence of 'selfies', rarely making use of the democratic potential of interactive online media.

[14] Cf. Horkheimer, Max/Adorno, Theodor W.: Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente. Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer 1969, p. 69.

[15] Cf. Rancière, Jacques: Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1998, p. 28.

political reality is no more than 'policing', in the broad sense of control-ling, managing and governing these divisions.[16] On the other hand, a truly political act – in the emphatic sense Rancière gives the word political[17] – is opposed to such 'distributions', segregations and inequalities. Utopian politics, then, could be conceived as reclaiming a political sphere from the totality consisting of various privatised spaces, which means to deprivatise utopia and to re-publicise dreams of a better future.

UTOPIAN POLITICS

Rancière engages with metaphors of insularity and the political, as the title of a collection of his essays indicates: *On the Shores of Politics*, where he, for example, analyses the metaphorical association of the sea with democ-racy in Plato's thought.[18] More generally, his engagement with 'bounda-ries'[19] and the political is relevant here. On the basis of this, I will now sketch an approach to political utopia beyond the concept of the self-enclosed island. In an interview, Rancière himself rejects the term utopia – because "[t]here are so many things that are lumped together in the idea"[20]. My aim is to disentangle some of these 'lumps' and to contribute to a re-evaluation of utopian thought using Rancière's theories whilst put-ting a stronger emphasis on notions of a utopian future.[21] Rancière fo-cuses on "the awareness that you can begin *hic et nunc* a new life of equal-ity, use a new language, have 'new senses'"[22]. This notion of a departure from the existing social order can be linked to questions of insularity in the *now here* – as emphasised by Rancière. At the same time, his focus on "a *new* life of equality" can also be used to develop concepts of political utopia; I propose to maintain this term in order to underscore the search for the "new", for a political alternative, which is as yet *nowhere*.

A short quote from Rancière's *Ten Theses on Politics* can serve as a starting point: "Politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen, it lodges one world into another"[23]. This view of politics is based on a

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16 Cf. ibid., p. 28f.
17 Cf. for example ibid., p. 11f.
18 Cf. Rancière, Jacques: On the Shores of Politics. Trans. Liz Heron. London/New York: Verso 2007, p. 2. See below on the use of such water metaphors today.
19 Cf. ibid., p. 1.
20 Blechman, Max et al.: Democracy, Dissensus and the Aesthetics of Class Struggle: An Exchange with Jacques Rancière. In: Historical Materialism 13.4 (2005), p. 285–301, here p. 294.
21 Cf. ibid., p. 291f.
22 Cf. ibid., p. 294.
23 Rancière, Jacques: Ten Theses on Politics. Trans. Davide Panagia/Rachel Bowlby. In: Theory and Event 5.3 (2001), par. 24.

Foucaultian notion of discursive divisions: there are certain positions which can be articulated and others which are not heard or, indeed, 'seen', in the sense of not qualifying as an articulation of a political will, or as no scene fit to be regarded in political terms.[24] Dominant society has "no reason" to see these spaces. In history, an example for such an invisible position is the domestic realm and women's role within it: it simply did not qualify as a topic for political debate.[25] Women's emancipation can then be described as a making visible of that space by 'lodging' the 'world' of the house 'into' the 'world' of the public, a politicisation of the private in the positive sense of opening it towards democratic exchange and communal care. Such politicisations in general follow the reverse trajectory of the construction of private insular utopias. Rancière's processual concept of the political is precisely to open up insular spaces, and thus to open spaces for those who did not "partake"[26] in politics before. He identifies politics with the concepts of equality and democracy,[27] highlighting that there is a fundamental contradiction between the founding ideas of Western democracies and the realities of inequality.[28] This can be seen as an unfulfilled utopian impulse at the heart of existing societies. Rancière links material social inequality to the discursive segregation of spaces and situations cut off from the possibility of political, democratic articulation. Only transgressions of these boundaries deserve the name 'political' in Rancière's definition whereas remaining within the established order is mere administration 'policing' the status quo.[29] This redefinition of politics as a positive notion of change can be related to utopian thought.

Political utopia in this sense would not be situated on a self-enclosed island, but rather in discursively created non-places from which the 'partitioning' of social spaces is called into question. This, too, can be conceived as a form of island utopia using a conception of the island which starts from its ambivalence between closure and openness, represented by its dialectical relationship to the sea as its other.[30] Rather than a space of limitation and isolation, in this view, the island is an open space of encounters between that which was separated or seen as a dichotomy before:[31] land and sea, inside and outside, included and excluded, public and

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[24] Cf. Rancière, Disagreement, p. 28f.

[25] Cf. Rancière, Ten Theses, par. 23.

[26] Ibid., par. 10.

[27] Cf. Rancière, Disagreement, p. 33 and p. 99.

[28] Cf. ibid., p. 51f.

[29] Cf. ibid., p. 29f.

[30] Cf. Dautel, Katrin/Schödel, Kathrin: Introduction – Insularity, Islands and Insular Spaces. In this volume, p. 11–28, here p. 11f.

[31] Cf. Moser, Christian: Archipele der Erinnerung. Die Insel als Topos der Kulturisation. In: Böhme, Hartmut (ed.): Topographien der Literatur. Deutsche Literatur im

private, 'ours' and 'theirs', visible and invisible. In a reversal of the notion of self-enclosed utopias, the metaphor of the island can thus be used to highlight that the aim of such utopian politics is not the establishment of a single homogenous and closed-off space of consensus[32] or a totalitarian state, but that it consists in a democratic process, creating a multitude of spaces or utopian isles. Beyond the distribution of spaces in the current socio-political order, such *no-man's-islands* are to be claimed as "political stage[s]"[33]: public spaces of the articulation and making visible of the previously 'unseen'. In Rancière's conception, this is a continuous process of inserting the 'principle of equality' into the formation of 'partitions' within various contexts. Equality, for Rancière, can neither be seen as a "given" nor as a "goal", but it is an "assumption"[34] that needs to be asserted again and again. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that such assertions not only pertain to specific instances of discursive reformations, but that they entail a radical insistence on the reorganisation of the public.[35] Through the creation of utopian *no-man's-islands* outside of the entrenched 'police' logic of distribution, this very logic is challenged in its material reality. This can be somewhat obscured by Rancière's emphasis on the political as a "staging" of "scenes of dissensus".[36] However, when the 'no man', the person who did not qualify as a political subject before, insists on the political quality of his or her demands, it means a radical change not only of perception but of socio-political realities. In order to explore this further, I will turn to a concrete example *now here*. It is linked to my reference to 'no-man's-land': the insularity of the existing political delimitation of spaces in the form of national territories and the topical issue of migration.

ON THE SHORES OF GLOBALISATION

An unsettling and recurring image of insular seclusion in the current Western cultural imaginary can be found in the popular genre of the zombie film: there is an abundance of scenes showing an undifferentiated mass of a dehumanised other which threatens to enter and destroy sheltered 'is-

transnationalen Kontext. DFG-Symposion 2004. Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler 2005, p. 408–432, here p. 412f.

[32] Cf. Rancière, Disagreement, p. 95–121.

[33] Ibid., p. 49.

[34] Ibid., p. 33.

[35] Cf. Blechman et al., Exchange with Rancière, p. 295f.

[36] Rancière, Jacques: Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man? In: The South Atlantic Quarterly 103.2/3 (2004), p. 297–310, here p. 304.

lands' of humanity.[37] The popularity of this theme suggests that it mirrors a widespread fear that outside of 'our' world there is a mass of excluded people threatening to come in and to turn 'us' into 'them'.[38] An especially crude illustration of this view can be found on a front cover of the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, where the headline *Surge of the Poor. The New Mass Migration*[39] is illustrated by an image of people coming from the sea, poor and helpless, but also threatening, advancing like the typical row of zombies, mindless but dangerous in the absolute will to survive.[40] This can be connected to Rancière's theories on several levels. The wide-spread use of water metaphors to describe what is represented as a "surge" or 'flood' and 'stream' of migrants corresponds to Rancière's observation of the metaphorical link between "the sea" and the rejection of the democratic "populace"[41] in Plato's writings. It ties in with a tradition of metaphorical descriptions of masses of people with water imagery, which is a version of insularity: the others are constructed as an undifferentiated mass outside of 'our' islands of distinct individuality. They also represent the radically democratic 'threat' of a demand for equality in the face of an ever increasing gap between rich and poor, the mass of the poor threatening to enter the sheltered islands of wealth. There is, thus, a – more or less explicit – knowledge of the fact that seemingly open democratic societies are in reality closed insular worlds, which protect themselves by forceful exclusion. This becomes especially obvious on the islands at the borders of the EU with the arrival as well as – sadly – the failed arrival of migrants. But this is only one of the more visible examples of exclusions 'on the shores of globalisation' – the social exclusions and inequalities brought about by economic processes and reinforced by those political measures Rancière calls 'policing'. It is visible in the sense of media representation, but remains invisible in the broader sense of Rancière's conception. The so-called 'problem of migration'[42] is not conceived as a political issue, let

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[37] Cf. for example the mass of zombies climbing the wall of a protected zone and forming a wave-like shape in World War Z. Dir. Marc Forster. U.S.: Plan B Entertainment 2013, 59:58.

[38] Cf. Rath, Krzysztof W.: Sie kommen!, 25 July 2013, URL: https://krzysztof wrath.wordpress.com/2013/07/25/sie-kommen/ (accessed 16 February 2015), who also refers to the scene mentioned here.

[39] Der Spiegel 26, 26.6.2006, titlepage, URL: http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-47360672.html (accessed 17 February 2015). My translation, K.S.

[40] Cf. on such prevalent discursive constructions of 'the immigrant' in Europe also linking them to images of zombies: Kureishi, Hanif: The migrant has no face, status or story. In: The Guardian. Online, 30 May 2014, URL: http://www.the guardian.com/books/2014/may/30/hanif-kureishi-migrant-immigration-1 (accessed 16 February 2015).

[41] Rancière, Shores, p. 2.

[42] Cf. Kureishi, Migrant.

alone 'the migrant' as a political subject. A political act in Rancière's definition, then, would not be, as is currently the case, to 'manage' the suffering resulting from inequality and exclusion by literally policing national borders, for instance, and at the same time trying to save the lives of those attempting to cross these borders. It would mean to perceive the desperation of those arriving on 'our' shores not as a mere cry for humanitarian help, which only relates to the most basic needs, but to understand it as a political appeal.[43]

To envisage such a politicisation of the 'problem of migration', I will emphasise two aspects, taking two terms used to describe migrants as a focal point: 'refugee' and 'economic migrant'. The first term is often used in more well-meaning approaches, highlighting that migrants are in a desperate situation and have a right to protection. However, the construction of a distinction between the 'real', 'deserving' 'refugee' and someone who is 'just' an 'economic migrant' – often in fact fleeing severe hunger or a complete lack of perspectives – corresponds to one of the fundamental 'partitions' of current political space, the distinction between 'public' and 'private': economic conditions, as opposed to political and cultural persecution, do not deserve the treatment as a political issue – in a private economy they are largely a private problem. The 'economic migrant' is not a political subject, in the sense of having a voice or, very often, even the legal status of political citizen, and in the sense of being a topic for political debate. By becoming visible in the public sphere, this 'no man' can radically challenge existing social orders.[44] The first aspect of this is linked to the term 'refugee' and the fact that within hegemonic discourses it is not up to an individual to refer to him- or herself as 'refugee', but that the word confers a legal status. This means that the plight of being a 'refugee' has to be recognised within the 'police' logic. Exclusions and unequal power relations are, thus, inscribed in the term 'refugee'. Outside of the boundaries of national citizenship, a human being is – absurdly – 'illegal', despite the idea of universal human rights.[45] He or she is, therefore, also outside of the – not so very – 'public' political sphere.[46] To question

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[43] Cf. for the distinction between a mere expression of suffering and a political articulation Rancière, Disagreement, p. 2 and 126. Cf. ibid. for a critique of the 'humanitarian' approach, and see also Badiou, Alain: Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil. Trans. and Intro. Peter Hallward. London/New York: Verso 2002, p. 8–16.

[44] Cf. Rancière, Rights of Man, p. 305f.

[45] Cf. Hannah Arendt's famous chapter *The Perplexities of the Rights of Man* in Arendt, Hannah: The Origins of Totalitarianism. New Edition. San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt 1976, p. 290–302, and Rancière's critical engagement with Arendt's points in Rancière, Rights of Man.

[46] For a concrete analysis of such a situation (in Sweden) using Rancière's theories cf. Gunneflo, Markus/Selberg, Niklas: Discourse or Merely Noise? Regarding the Dis-

this status of migrants means to question this connection between a democratic public and the insular partitions of nationality. The second aspect of a utopian approach to migration *now here*, could be a politicisation of the 'economic migrant'. It starts from an emphasis on the connection between migration and global economic relations. The confrontation with the suffering and deaths on the shores of 'our' insular world could be an instigation to question the current form of globalisation, fundamentally based on the competition between private individuals for their own private *YouTopias* of happiness, success and wealth, which have to be shored up against others dreaming the same dream. Instead of the management of such private islands of business and profit, and even of private islands of help and hope, 'lodging' the world of the 'economic migrant' into the political world would mean 'lodging' economic relations 'into' the political sphere in a radical sense: claiming issues of work, production and distribution as political issues. The 'staging' of this utopian claim implies a different *now here*: a radical deprivatisation and democratisation of the economic sphere, transgressing the current partition between 'private' economy and 'public' politics, and a deprivatisation of visions of a better future.

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