Marx and Engels long ago noted that capitalist productivity entails unceasing destruction and destitution. As they put it in the *Communist Manifesto*: “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones” (38). Destruction is not a mere by-product of capitalist development; it is its fundamental pre-requisite as the formal subsumption of labor, whereby older technologies are maintained even as they are assimilated into capitalist relations, is replaced by real subsumption, which demands the fundamental transformation of all aspects of the productive process. But as a result, capitalism is also truly revolutionary: it abruptly does away with the hierarchies and injustices of earlier social formations, if only to replace them with a regime that is even more insidiously unequal and unjust. Ruins of the past may persist: more or less mute reminders of what has gone before, but these too are often enough caught up in the revolutionary whirlwind. If capital can profit from the ruins it creates, it does so, turning them for instance into historical theme-parks, sites for leisure or aesthetic contemplation. Ruined places and peoples can be treated with a certain exoticizing sympathy, at the same time as they are held up as object (and objectified) lesson in what happens to those who do not adapt fast enough to changing times. In short, they can be resignified as part of a master narrative of progress. More often, however, capital moves swiftly on, brutally unsentimental about the devastation it leaves in its wake. Still, there is something strangely creative about the destruction wrought by capitalist modernity, a fact analyzed by theorists from Werner Sombart to Joseph Schumpeter.
Some have celebrated capital’s tendency to build on ruins, seeing it in Darwinian terms as an instance of the survival of the fittest. As Schumpeter argues, “the essential point to grasp is that in dealing with capitalism we are dealing with an evolutionary process” (Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy 82). Others have been more ambivalent or even downright critical. Recently, Naomi Klein has revived the notion of creative destruction with her observations in The Shock Doctrine, but with a twist. For Klein, catastrophe is not so much endemic to capitalism as a necessary supplement for the particular hyper-capitalist ethos that goes by the name of neoliberalism. What she terms “disaster capitalism” arises in the twentieth century with the Pinochet dictatorship, only then to spread around the world. Klein argues that the successful implementation of neoliberal “reforms” depends upon a catastrophic “shock,” whether that be imposed from above (as in Chile) or whether it be an apparent “Act of God” (such as Hurricane Katrina) from which capital can opportunistically profit. In this version, it is not capitalism on its own that engineers the destruction upon which its creativity depends: some external force or sovereign violence intervenes to pave the way for economic restructuring, which is in turn devastating in its own way. But the shock comes first: the political has priority, and contemporary capitalism is rather more Leninist that its proponents would like to believe.

For Marx and Engels, the effects of capitalism’s creative destruction are epistemological as much as they are social, political, or economic. “All that is solid melts into air,” as they famously observe, “all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind” (38-39). Intrinsic or extrinsic to capitalist production, it is crisis that allows us to see the truth of bourgeois society--and perhaps the preconditions of any society--clearly for the first time. The continual catastrophes that mark modernity allow an opening to capital’s posthegemonic kernel: every trace of ideology is swept away. Indeed, all narratives are briefly disrupted and we are left with a glimpse of what Giorgio Agamben would call bare life. Not only therefore does creative destruction do away with the oppressive social structures of the past: for all the neoliberal dictum that in the face of disaster “there is no alternative” to free-market deregulation, it also suggests that capitalism may not be the only beneficiary of the very crises that it lives and breathes. Catastrophe offers a turning point. It provides space for the rearticulation of well-worn mantras, which may gain renewed purchase when our defenses have been
downed. It may also subsequently provide a mythic origin for new narratives and new articulations, perhaps more sinister than hitherto. But further, crisis has the potential to allow something genuinely unheralded (if perhaps long felt) to emerge: in laying bare what Marx and Engels term man’s “relations with his kind,” it reveals what we have in common. However much it hits some more than others, the propensity to be touched by calamity is ultimately a condition that we have in common with others. Moreover, disaster tends to exert a brute levelling, to provoke shared affects and induce fellowship. So as Rebecca Solnit argues, “extraordinary communities” are built on the very ordinary experience of common practices and habits that emerge out of destruction.

There is little that is more destructive than war. Indeed, Sombart’s pioneering theorization of creative destruction was based on an analysis of the relationship between war and capitalism: it was war, he argued, that gave rise to capitalism, not least because of the need to create what would later be termed a “military-industrial complex” to wage war on a grand scale. Wars also stoke, as well as being stoked by, national and communitarian myths of origin, providing the justification for states to consolidate and reorganize their coercive powers. And yet, for Pierre Clastres, warfare may in some circumstances at least be a means of warding off the state: for so-called primitive society, war is an expression of *conatus*, an attempt to maintain the common.

Rodrigo Naranjo’s magnificent book on the “War of the Pacific” touches on all these issues. The 1879 to 1884 conflict between Chile, Peru, and Bolivia certainly left devastation in its wake: over 10,000 casualties, but perhaps more significantly the trauma of invasion and occupation for Peru, and the severing of Bolivia’s outlet to the Pacific. Unsurprisingly, the war has had very different treatments in the historiographies of the three affected countries, and Naranjo is first of all to be commended for providing a truly comparative analysis of the distinct narratives to be found on every side of the borders that the violence itself re-drew. The very name of the conflict itself is at issue: is this the “War of the Pacific” or is it rather the “Saltpeter War,” the “Guano War,” the “Ten Cents War” or the “War with Chile”? Hence the very “minimal” methodological criterion of “visiting one’s neighbors” implies a complex process of translation and negotiation between very different, often diametrically opposed, discursive presuppositions and traditions. And yet the second minimal criterion, that of “sustaining a dialogue [. . .] that would preserve the specificity of the
problem posed” militates against the notion of translation as transparency or equivalence. For the very basis of Naranjo’s effort is an attempt to affirm heterogeneity, rather than to accede to any homogenizing discourse that would put things in their so-called “proper” place. Hence this book’s animus against “area studies” and even the project of Latin Americanism as a whole: it is against the reconciliation of differences that such panoramic surveys purport to offer. It is even against the gestural politics of restitution incarnated, for instance, in the various suggestions (most recently an accord between Alan García and Evo Morales in October 2010) that either Chile or Peru should offer Bolivia some kind of access to a Pacific port. No. Naranjo’s is an account of the War of the Pacific that restages and respects its incomplete or missed encounters (“desencuentros,” to use the term taken from Julio Ramos) and refuses to subsume them within some new master narrative or project for political unity. It is a demastering of the narratives that surround the war--and violence in general. It is only a small irony, and a small price to pay, that this demastering is accomplished with such mastery.

Moreover, the discontinuities that generated (and were generated by) the war are not merely, or even most importantly, those between nations. On the contrary: if anything it was the war itself that enabled or provoked efforts to construct some kind of fictive national imaginary. Naranjo is as interested in the heterogeneity that persists within national boundaries, as well as the points of contact and commonality that overflow them. Hence, for instance, even in what is apparently the most successful case, that of Chile, the effort to narrate the war as a revindication of national belonging, as the construction of a mestizo society on the basis of the aptly-named “rotos” or “broken” fragments who constituted the country’s footsoldiers in the campaign, is repeatedly re-frAGMENTed and undone. A left-wing narrative of origin, whereby the conflict is imagined to have engendered a working-class subject of insurgency, confronts a right-wing and authoritarian narrative by which the Pinochet dictatorship aimed to justify the centrality of the army to the life of the nation. This narrative divergence retains such relevance that during the general’s detention in London in 1999 it becomes once again a point of dispute: as Naranjo relates, a “historians’ manifesto” re-arguing the historiography of what was by then a conflict over a century old opened up “a dissensus with the scene of representation of Chilean history” in which the very concepts of sovereignty and mastery were under interrogation. Yet Naranjo, again, has no wish to decide the question one way or the other; if anything, he prefers to show
how the supposedly counter-hegemonic narrative produced by figures such as
Communist leader Volodia Teitelboim in fact mirrors rather than truly subverting the
official history to which it responds. Both, in the end, are discourses of appropriation
and subjectification that seek to erase heterogeneity in order to produce the effect of a
popular subject. Naranjo, by contrast, has no interest in subjectification, which in all
cases he suggests is necessarily a mechanism of *subject* to homogeneity, an erasure of
difference. Or, to put it in the terms that Naranjo favors, it is an exercise in
“classification” all the same even if the eventual subject is a working class one, and so
notionally insurgent.

All narratives of classification, even those of “counter-hegemonic history” that
“present themselves as a ‘commitment’ to the popular,” ultimately “operate within the
writing machine of war, seeking to safeguard a concept of sovereignty.” They are all, in
other words, instances of what Ranajit Guha calls the “prose of counter-insurgency.”
Moreover, in his refusal of counter-hegemony as much as of hegemony, and for all his
acknowledgement of Antonio Gramsci, Naranjo shows himself a partisan of what I
describe as posthegemony, which implies at a minimum (and against a theorist such as
Ernesto Laclau) an unwillingness to see the replacement of one hegemony by another as
any kind of improvement, either for politics or for political analysis. Instead, Naranjo
shows how the war has been taken to be a “gift” for left and right, nationalist and
internationalist, localist and Latin Americanist alike, and seeks to undo the mechanisms
(literally, the “writing machine”) whereby such a gift is taken up and appropriated by
would-be hegemonic projects. He aims to interrupt the gift economy that disaster
would seem to initiate, returning us rather to the incommensurability of heterogeneity
by way of *de*classification. We might imagine this as a form of realism: if the desert on
which and for which much of the conflict was undertaken ultimately proved
astonishingly fertile not only for the economic interests that sought to exploit its
resources but also for the political interests (even in the defeated countries) that have
used it as a bargaining chip or pedagogic illustration ever since, Naranjo is determined
to return us to the desert of the real in all its ruination and apparent desolation.

But there are many possible ways to return to ruination. Here lies my one slight
difference with some aspects of Naranjo’s project. He takes inspiration from, among
others, the philosopher Patricio Marchant who outlines the task of the “negative
intellectual” as that of “commenting on the catastrophe (the war, the coup, the
discovery and the conquest) to expose, precisely, the shattering \textit{estallido} of community (of the community of sense and of the sense of the national community.” This commentary upon catastrophe reveals the double sense (and so double non-sense) of the term “estallido,” which means shattering or explosion but also--when it comes to the discourse of war, at least--outbreak or origin. The origin of community is at the same time, irrevocably, its shattering or dissolution; as soon as community comes into being it has always already blown up or exploded. So far, so good in its own way. But the danger in the role of the negative intellectual is that it reaches its limit at the site of this outbreak/outburst. Viewing disaster and destruction solely in terms of its epistemological priority threatens to rejuvenate the very gift economy of war that Naranjo otherwise repudiates. It takes disaster as a gift to critical thought. Attending so closely to catastrophe, installing oneself at the scene of devastation, may become an end in itself. Are there not, however, other forms of community or (better) commonality, ways of being in common, that arise from such creative destruction? How would one actively \textit{affirm} heterogeneity, beyond engaging in untiring critique of all homogenizing projects? What would be the positive counterpart to the labor of declassification? In short, I would have liked to hear more about the “multi-facted relations of exceptions and bodies that infect each other and establish relations with each other” even as they “destroy each other in the scenes of \textit{survival} of catastrophes, conquests, occupations, and deracinations” (emphasis in original).

In the end, destruction is, well, destructive as well as creative; we need not be nostalgic about the old order to recognize the pain that its dissolution entails. Yet that pain, that affect, is also the basis for relations between bodies that endure despite the disaster that has befallen them. For ruination is evidence not simply of loss; to harp continually on the fragment is to be seduced into the possibility that there really was once an organic totality that sits in spectral judgment on the present. The continued presence of ruins is a testimony rather to survival, to the insistence of a materiality that can never be simply erased or smoothed over. Ruins are part objects that have their own facticity and their own real effectiveness that hardly depends upon their relation to some absent whole. Yet precisely because they are incomplete, because they do not “add up” to one, ruins are also always plural: they are collections or agglomerations of bodies that, scattered in the desert, cohabit a space with no fixed boundaries. In learning to live in and with the heterogeneity of the ruination caused by capital and
appropriated by the nation state, we might also understand (better, feel) an unclassifiable commonality that inheres in a multitude of singularities and their collective *conatus*. Perhaps the most significant contribution of Naranjo’s marvellous book is that it clears the ground, in almost archaeological manner, so that we can begin to discern at last the secret life of ruins in themselves, the conditions of their existence and their reciprocal relations.

*works cited*


