In a letter to a close friend dated April 1922 Le Corbusier announced that he was to publish his first major book, *Architecture et révolution*, which would collect “a set of articles from L’EN.”1–L’*Esprit nouveau*, the revue jointly edited by him and painter Amédée Ozenfant, which ran from 1920 to 1925.2 A year later, Le Corbusier sketched a book cover design featuring “LE CORBUSIER - SAUGNIER,” the pseudonymic compound of Pierre Jeanneret and Ozenfant, above a square-framed single-point perspective of a square tunnel vanishing toward the horizon. Occupying the lower half of the frame was the book’s provisional title in large handwritten capital letters, *ARCHITECTURE OU RÉVOLUTION*, each word on a separate line, the “ou” a laconic inflection of Paul Laffitte’s proposed title, *effected by Le Corbusier*.3 Laffitte was one of two publishers Le Corbusier was courting between 1921 and 1922.4 An advertisement for the book, with the title finally settled upon, *Vers une architecture*,5 was solicited for *L’Esprit nouveau* number 18. This was the original title conceived with Ozenfant, and had in fact already appeared in two earlier announcements.6

“Architecture ou révolution” was retained as the name of the book’s crucial and final chapter—the culmination of six chapters extracted from essays in *L’Esprit nouveau*. This chapter contained the most quoted passage in *Vers une architecture*, used by numerous scholars to adduce Le Corbusier’s political sentiment in 1923 to the extent of becoming axiomatic of his early political thought.7 Interestingly, it is the only chapter that was not published in *L’Esprit nouveau*, owing to a hiatus in the journal’s production from June 1922 to November 1923.8 An agitprop pamphlet was produced in 1922, after *L’Esprit nouveau* 11-12, advertising an imminent issue “Architecture ou révolution” with the famous warning: “the housing crisis will lead to the revolution. Worry about housing.”9

I would like to propose that it was Le Corbusier himself who changed the earlier title to *Architecture ou révolution*, in 1922, at the precise moment Le Corbusier-Saugnier’s selfsame rubric for the forthcoming issue of *L’Esprit nouveau* materialized, and which was, in turn, reserved for the final chapter of his book. Laffitte suggested the “et” in what was a partial neutralization of the architect’s theoretical intent. Le Corbusier
acquiesced to the edit and soon after—and behind Laffitte’s back—submitted a draft manuscript with Laffitte’s version of the title to Besson. However, by January 1923, Le Corbusier had reverted to his original book title of 1918, Vers une architecture, as per the advertisement in L’Esprit nouveau. This history of names is neither pedantic nor trivial if we consider the appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of the word révolution. Despite—or in spite of—the return to Vers une architecture in 1923, that same year, Le Corbusier’s cover design curiously bears the title Architecture ou révolution, from which we can deduce that the modern architect held on to la révolution as the leitmotif of his project until the end. The book ends with the said remark:

Society violently desires one thing that it will obtain or that it will not. Everything lies in that; everything will depend on the effort made and the attention paid to these alarming symptoms.

Architecture or revolution.
Revolution can be avoided.

Historians have interpreted this passage hence: Le Corbusier believed modern architecture (mass housing and the “engineer’s aesthetic”) was the prevention of social unrest, a translation consistent with the dominant reception of Le Corbusier’s early philosophy as a Saint Simonian social-utopianism, whose paradigm is the Ville Contemporaine with its technocratic associations. Following Le Corbusier’s early association with the twenties’ Redressement Français, there exists a notion of a radical shift in Le Corbusier’s philosophy by the forties, when he joined the Vichy regime. This is based on the facts that in the 1930s Le Corbusier was associated with Georges Valois and Hubert Lagardelle, that he was the editor of the syndicalist journal Prélude, that he delivered a lecture in Rome in 1934 (invited by Mussolini), and most importantly that he collaborated with Vichy in the 1940s. Yet, despite Le Corbusier’s late authoritarian activities and affiliation, the architect’s postwar works such as the Unité d’Habitation, are still often paralleled with the Phalanstère and ideal city of Charles Fourier as industrial socialist models of the city. The conception of modernism as a utopian project of social redemption endures in no small part because of this historical reading of Le Corbusier’s refrain Architecture ou révolution in 1923. This is the reading I will contest in this essay.

It is widely known the young architect condemned the French Revolution of 1789, which he felt was responsible for the decline of French art. Yet Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris was also proud of the revolutionary history of his ancestry, as per the account he provided of his grandfather’s participation in the 1831 and 1848 revolutions in Crusade or the Twilight of the Academies. Le Corbusier must have known that L’Esprit nouveau was the title of a book on politics in 1875 by Quinet, an intellectual and rioter in the very 1848 revolution. Furthermore, in 1923 Le Corbusier reproduced the first principle of the French Revolution in Enlightenment France
Figure 1 Le Corbusier, Architecture ou révolution, sketch for cover design.
at the end of the eighteenth century: he cast himself as a revolutionary intellectual, entitled to property. I propose the locution “Architecture ou révolution” is neither against social revolution nor is it socialist credo per se: “Architecture or Revolution” is a heuristic device that transcends the received socialist dialectical reading of Le Corbusier’s argument, architecture/revolution. The architect’s contended and self-proclaimed “politics” and “beliefs” should be considered historical projections that converge on the Realpolitik of twentieth-century thought between the two wars, a politico-conceptual groundswell he cannot have avoided.

For in 1923 there was a real revolution unfolding before Le Corbusier’s eyes: the Fascist revolution of Benito Mussolini. The international surge of fascism and authoritarian philosophy in the beginning of the twentieth century forms prima facie the atmosphere and lining of Le Corbusier and Ozenfant’s literary project (even if the architect declared himself to be a socialist in 1919, and then a conservative in 1920). Less than a year before Vers une architecture was published, the National Fascist Party (Partito Nazionale Fascista, PNF) rose to power. Le Corbusier noted in his memoirs: “1922 Fascist march on Rome. Mussolini takes power in Italy”—and he was deeply moved. Mussolini had successfully deployed the fanatical Squadristi (the Blackshirts) to extinguish Italy’s socialist movement as early as 1920, the year L’Esprit nouveau debuted. Ten years later, Le Corbusier would describe the Exhibition for the anniversary of the March on Rome as “the prodigious Rome-Exhibition of the Revolution.” This is the revolution intended by Le Corbusier, a violent reversal by an authority—not the proletarian revolution that he denounced. For him, Italian Fascism was revolutionary in the true sense of a radical (structural) change in power that takes place at lightning speed.

If Italy was late to adopt modern architecture, compared with France and Germany, in the making of authoritarian politics and history, Italy was precocious. It is didactic in this regard that unlike Italy, France did not experience massive popular support for fascism—notwithstanding the Vichy collaboration, which was not strictly “conservative” but preserved many of the progressive social programs of the Front Populaire, and further, a spectrum of fascistic groups in 1920s-1930s France. Instead, France provided the intellectual antecedents for fascism prior to the 1920s, in earlier movements such as the far-right monarchist Action Française, founded in 1898 during the Dreyfus affair; in Emile Zola’s publication J’Accuse and the nationalist response to the latter in figures such as anti-Semite Maurice Barres; and even the Jacobinism of the French Revolution (1789-1799). As is well known, modern fascist political philosophy first manifested in France in the fin de siècle movement of the 1880s, whose proponents were a mixture of Italian and French intellectual figures such as the French revolutionary anarcho-syndicalist Georges Sorel. By 1909 Sorel and his followers had moved from the radical left to the right, and Sorelianism came to be seen as the precursor to twentieth-century fascism. Even while fascism in France failed to captivate the masses it formed the intellectual framework and inspi-
ration for Mussolini, who would later acknowledge his debt to Sorel in “The Doctrine of Fascism.”

Under these conditions, L’Esprit nouveau was coolly received, with its socialist urbanism and aspirations of land reformation. All the while Le Corbusier yearned for “a Napoleon I,” a “Louis XIV,” or a Haussmann—and lamented that France had no Mussolini or Hitler. Such facts have been produced as evidence of a contradiction in Le Corbusier’s political position—an argument overturned by Paul Venable Turner’s 1971 Harvard dissertation, which reveals Le Corbusier’s unwavering thought. Despite Turner’s scholarship, historians have vacillated between this theory of a shift in the architect’s thought (from the ‘Left’ to the ‘Right’), and a second reading of his ideological position as “contradictory,” “ambivalent” or “elusive.” Yet, this alleged contradiction lies outside Le Corbusier, and rests instead within the very gestation of fascism in France and Italy via the split within the revolutionary Left (the Socialist Parties in each country). The militant revolutionaries and fascists are linked prior to twentieth-century politics through a bitter intellectual battle that traces back to the birth of authoritarian thought. For Sorel and the French anarcho-syndicalists, violent revolution was a noble act carried out by both the proletariats and capitalists in order to intensify and not eliminate class warfare. Violence and war, the mythic catalyst for production, was the first tenet of Sorelianism.

Le Corbusier’s sentiment, therefore seen through Sorel’s eyes—“Society is filled with a violent desire for something which it may obtain, or may not. Everything lies in that. Everything depends on the effort made and the attention paid to these alarming symptoms. Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided”—does not evoke a socialist utopian revolution but its unconscious ideological shadow. Namely, that society has a desire for violence at the dawning of Fascism in 1923, a problem that would become the precise object of Wilhelm Reich’s study Massenpsychologie des Faschismus (The Mass Psychology of Fascism, later banned by the Nazis). Reich argued that it was not because people were stupid that they submitted to fascism, rather they desired it. The desire for violence, which it may or may not obtain, is manifestly erotic: the perversion seeks satisfaction through violent force, on the one hand, and derives pleasure in desire without gratification, on the other (Sorel’s war is an end in itself). In short, it speaks Walter Benjamin’s warning about the aestheticization of violence. Le Corbusier was nascently aware that desiring fascism is a neurosis—even while he called it “revolution”—and implored us to observe its “alarming symptoms.”

In 1925, the Duce announced his five-year plan to restore Rome to its original condition under Augustus. True to plan, he ordered the decimation of all urban fabric surrounding the great Roman monuments:
In five years Rome will appear beautiful to everyone in the world; vast, ordered and powerful as it was under Augustus. You will liberate the trunk of the great oak from everything that encumbers it. You will open up the areas around the theater of Marcellus, the Pantheon, and the Campidoglio; everything that was created during the centuries of decadence must disappear. In five years one must be able to see the Pantheon from the Piazza Colonna. You will also free the majestic temples of Christian Rome from their parasitical constructions. The millennial monuments of our history must stand isolated and majestic.

Le Corbusier shared Mussolini’s image of Rome of “decay” and “decadence,” meaning cluttered with post-Roman urban fabric. The architect had a similarly austere urban vision for Paris. Yet there is another resemblance between Mussolini’s aestheticization of Rome and the architect’s historical rendering in Vers une architecture, where Le Corbusier did not merely valorize Greece and Rome, and the age of classical antiquity: the Parthenon, Paestum, and Hadrian’s Villa, which are the formal quintessence of the “new spirit.” He graphically “isolated” and “purified” ancient monuments in the book, by deleting surrounding structures and architectural elements from the original photographs that were visual obstructions to the “majestic” formal concept of each building. In the pulpit of Santa Maria in Cosmedin he eliminated columns and blackened the windows. Once “freed,” the postcard images were serialized on the page, resembling Mussolini’s stark serialized vision of Rome. Just as Mussolini called the Pantheon and Piazza Colonna to stand in a strict visual line, “Leçon de Rome” begins with the famously austere line up of monuments: the Pyramid of Cestius 12 BCE, the Colosseum 80 CE, Arch of Constantine 12 CE, that renders each building beautiful, large, and alone in what is fundamentally revisionist historiography.

In another sequence Notre Dame Cathedral, the Arc de Triomphe, Place de l’Opéra, and Saint-Jacques church tower are isolated and serialized over a black silhouette of “The Cunarder Aquitania” ship. France, here, is suspended in Le Corbusier’s beloved méditerranée—and Italy becomes the birthplace, the primordial sea, of modern architecture.

For “The Lesson of Rome” is not a reactionary preservation by isolation, and Le Corbusier’s pictures of Rome are not allegory or anachronism. Instead, there is a sense in both Le Corbusier and Mussolini of a fatalistic palingenesis: their revolution is a destined rebirth that must be activated by a purification of the metaphysical ground. In 1922, the first year of Fascist rule, Mussolini introduced a new Fascist calendar and renumbered the year 1922 “Year 1 EF” (Era Fascista). Revolution in this sense is no return to a constituted past, redacted or untouched, but to creation ex nihilo—it is an ontological return. The Italian reception of Le Corbusier’s book was spectacular not because of its valorization of Italy and antiquity, but the promise of a return to the very beginning of time itself. It is with this sense of an elusive degree zero that Le
Corbusier grasps la révolution and le nouveau—for him, these are essentially metaphysical concepts on Time and Being. Le Corbusier’s revolution as a theory of time derived from his reading of Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return in Also sprach Zarathustra, on the infinite rebirth of the universe rooted in the ancient Greek Stoic philosophy on the cyclical nature of temporality. Eternal return is a concept Nietzsche also used to defend Amor fati—the choice to love one’s fate including suffering, loss, destruction—hence the notion of revolution as a creative-destruction that resurfaces in Le Corbusier.

These ideas are evident even in Le Corbusier’s choice of title, Vers une architecture. “Toward” indicated the elusive character of time, of futurity, and of their expression in architectural terms. “Des yeux qui ne voient pas” came from Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem Le phénomène futur. Le Corbusier saw himself as Henri Provensal’s artiste du futur and the Nietzschean Surhumain—as summarized by Turner, “a new type of man … who embodies the Future.” Thus his architectural vision, which I have elsewhere described as an “esprit futur,” reached for the eternal return: a spirit of the future materialized in an idealized permanent present.

It is not only Zarathustra’s mastery of “la bête,” but the mastery of temporality and the future itself that inspired Le Corbusier. The revue’s name was also indebted to Apollinaire’s manifesto “L’Esprit nouveau et les poètes” which captured the revolution Le Corbusier had in mind (the two met in 1908): “They will carry you … Into universes which tremble ineffably above our heads. Into those nearer and further universes which gravitate to the same point of infinity as what we carry within us … a renewal of ourselves, that eternal creation, that endless rebirth by which we live.”

Le Corbusier’s very definition of geometric volumes was an effect of the horizon illuminated by the sun to express the “eternal Ideal” or “absolute.” Such concepts are more evocative of Hegel than Nietzsche. However, unlike the studies connecting Le Corbusier to Nietzsche, the unconscious Hegelianism that underpins Le Corbusier’s writing has been neglected, with one exception. Paul Venable Turner’s dissertation of 1971 established the Hegelian basis of Le Corbusier, not through any documented reading or knowledge of Hegel by Le Corbusier, but rather by tracing the Geist, Hegel’s “pure spirit” as it survives in Le Corbusier’s thought. According to Turner, it was through Le Corbusier’s study of Provensal’s book L’art de demain, given to him by his teacher, L’Eplattenier, that Le Corbusier’s voice is Hegelian. Provensal’s philosophy of architecture was based on the nineteenth-century tradition of German Idealism of Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling, “especially Hegel,” after Kant, a chain that is reinvoked with Le Corbusier’s very concept L’Esprit nouveau. Turner points out that Le Corbusier was unique in his conception of the Parthenon as “pure création de l’esprit.” Of course, the notions of temporality and le nouveau derive from the Greeks, yet “spirit” as the essence of revolution is quintessentially Hegelian, from Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, and it re-appears in Nietzsche. Le Corbusier had studied Renan’s Vie de Jésus where Jesus is a heroic
“revolutionary;” leading Turner to state that the revolution that most impressed Le Corbusier, the sections he bracketed in Renan’s reading was the revolution of the intellect and devotion to spirit. Ironically, Le Corbusier dismissed Germany architecturally and culturally (deeming both inferior to Italy and Greece), yet despite having possibly never read Hegel, his philosophy is entrenched in the German metaphysical tradition.

Le Corbusier, like Mussolini, saw himself as a “prophet” with a spiritual calling. The violence that they praised is not populist violence, but the violence of the superman: La révolution for Le Corbusier was precisely that of a master like Mussolini. The figure of the master (surhomme) is the one feature that continues throughout Le Corbusier’s career irrespective of activities and alliances, left or right. This persistent identification with the master connects him to authoritarian thought and to the Hegelian “master-slave dialectic,” the seminal passage of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. “At the threshold of the house they will install a vigilant guardian: the conditions of nature. On their coming, the revolution will be accomplished.” Thus, Le Corbusier does not mean revolution in the Marcuse or Marxian sense. Architecture is not a surrogate for revolution in Le Corbusier, and neither does revolution mean “mass housing” or the “engineer’s aesthetic.” Le Corbusier’s theory of revolution does not derive from Fourier, Saint-Simon or the French Revolution (except when they are derogatory references), but rather from Nietzsche and Hegel. Le Corbusier’s philosophy is not political philosophy, anyway, but Western metaphysics in the tradition of German aesthetics: that is the real site of la Révolution.

I propose that European statecraft in the 1920s and 1930s is a better model for understanding revolution in Le Corbusier’s philosophical schemata, than France’s serial revolutions and its bloody past. What Le Corbusier produces is not a theory of French State formation but an architectural formation suspended in the viscid fluid of an eternal present—a perpetual rebirth of architecture’s future in the present moment. These concepts and themes were circulating in France through exposure to Italian politics and its prevailing theories of temporality, essential to the fascist conceptual apparatus. Le Corbusier’s love of Italy and admiration of the Fascist Italian revolution contributed in a disturbing yet elusive way to the development of Le Corbusier’s thought. For this reason, perhaps, Le Corbusier’s politics on the right may have received less exposure in the architectural academy than the architect’s views on social reform. This is not to rehabilitate the dialectical theory of Le Corbusier’s ideation, to the right and left. Rather, the task ahead is to examine the despotic contents of Le Corbusier’s version of utopia, the very genealogy of utopia and authoritarianism in the French Enlightenment, and its culmination in the French Revolution (1789) where such contradictory discourses and concepts freely circulated.

The Hegelian method identified in Le Corbusier and Mussolini provides critical insight into the Zeitgeist between the two wars, and is further key to the relation between the two prolific writers. This is not to say that Hegel is the ‘philosopher of fas-
cism’ in any reductive sense, as Nietzsche was ascribed to Nazism; but, in the sense, that Hegel and Plato are fundamental to Western thought and the birth of modernity at the dawning of fascist ideology. Adorno and Horkeimer’s project situated Hegelian philosophy as fundamental to the relation of modernity and fascism, a problem they called the “dialectic of enlightenment,” the reversion of humanism to barbarism under Enlightenment philosophy. Obversely, postwar historiography situated modern art and the avant-garde against fascism, notwithstanding the work of the Frankfurt School on the complicity of the avant-garde with conservative ideologies during the Third Reich. It was only by the 1980s and 1990s that a number of studies emerged on the contribution of modernism and avant-garde culture to the formation of fascist ideologies between the wars. These studies were undertaken by historians in Political Science, Art History, French Studies, and German History; notably, Mark Antliff’s essay on Le Corbusier and the anarcho-syndicalist Georges Valois, in his edited collection on Fascism and Art; and Zeev Sternhell’s account of Le Corbusier’s affiliation with Valois’s group. Within the architectural academy, the most important work on fascism and Le Corbusier has been undertaken by Mary McLeod, Robert Fishman, and Jean Louis Cohen, as noted earlier.

Yet, the relationship between architectural modernity and fascism remains in some other, unspoken sense ungraspable—a block in architectural thought. There is a vast literature on the architectures of regime in Italy and Germany during the two wars. But the question has been historically conceived by way of an allegorical model, toward the symbolic value of fascist architecture, such as Italian rationalism, in serving or representing a regime—within the circuit of patronage or profit. Likewise, historians have depicted the embrace of Le Corbusier by the Faisceau, who believed Le Corbusier’s plans represented their mythic La Cité, as naïve or not fully grasping Le Corbusier’s work. These representational schemata fail to engage the question of how philosophical fascism was instrumental to the conceptual methodologies of the avant-garde, to dominant modernism as imaginaire and the formulation of architectural objecthood. It is possible that fascism was not the enemy of modernism, but its principal technique.
1 Le Corbusier to William Ritter, 7 April 1922, R3/19/391, FLC: “Architecture et révolution;” “suite des articles dans l’EN.”

2 He had already published Étude sur le mouvement d’art décoratif en Allemagne in 1912, and Après le cubism in 1918 with Amédée Ozenfant, but Vers une architecture was Jeanneret’s book debut.


6 Viz in Après le cubisme (1918), the November issue of L’Esprit nouveau (1921), and also in a letter to his parents (1919). Invoice from L’Esprit nouveau to G. [eorges] Crès, 9 January 1923, A(1)10, FLC; advertisement in Amédée Ozenfant, Après le cubisme (Paris: Editions des Commentaires, 1918),

27 Such political ambivalence is symptomatic of the authoritarian complex. The incorrect notion of ambivalence as indecisiveness or lack of rigour creates an historical shield from authoritarian thought, where such contradictions are critical symptoms, to be examined, not accidents.


30 Le Corbusier, Toward an Architecture, 195.


32 Le Corbusier, Vers une architecture, 124-125.


35 Simone Brott, “Esprit Futur,” Log 23 (Fall 2011).


37 Le Corbusier, Le voyage d’Orient (Paris: Editions Parenthèses, 1987), 125. “I think that the flatness of the horizon, particularly at noon when it imposes its uniformity on everything about it, provides for each one of us a measure of the most humanly possible perception of the absolute. In the radiant heat of the afternoon, suddenly there appears the pyramid of Athos!” Le Corbusier was drawn to the “limitless horizon of the southern sea.” My translation.


41 Turner, The Education of Le Corbusier: A Study of the Development of Le Corbusier’s Thought, 1900-1920, 63-64.


45 In her discussion on the Faisceau, McLeod reveals Valois’s great admiration of Le Corbusier’s work for wordlessly representing the Faisceau, on a purely symbolic level, without Valois having had any substantive conception of Le Corbusier’s work. McLeod, Urbanism and Utopia: Le Corbusier from Regional Syndicalism to Vichy, 101.