



CRISIS & CRITIQUE

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Dialectical Materialism Collective

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Introduction

Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza

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1. In an article published in 1802 in the “Critical Journal of Philosophy”, in which he elaborates his understanding of the essence of philosophical critique, G.W.F. Hegel claimed that the enterprise of critique is easily threatened, more precisely it is completely at a loss if it lacks an idea - Hegel here thinks of *the* idea of philosophy.¹ Critique is at a loss, since it becomes unable to propose any measure or reference-frame within which it could ensure its operation and thereby it ultimately regresses into being nothing but the articulation of an opinion. As much as every philosophy that does not entail an idea (of philosophy) turns out to be no philosophy any more, as much is any critique without idea not only empty, it rather is no real critique any longer.

Today it does not seem completely useless to recall Hegel's claim 112 years after it was published. For a lot of contemporary philosophical projects either sought to overcome the idea of critique, the conception of critique linked to an idea or the idea of the idea tout court and thereby regressed to different forms of subjectivism: to apologies of the present state of things in the guise of historical relativism, to a liberal idealization of the idea that slight modifications could make the contemporary world into a world with a human face, to blind optimism with regard to so called new social movements, or to a radical blindness with regard to the symptoms of contemporary political contradictions, etc.

Yet, there are also still certain self-proclaimed partisans that contend to endorse a renewed version of the Marxist idea of a critique of political economy and intend to defend its contemporary validity by showing how precisely through slight modifications it can be turned into a powerful tool to analyze the present political situation. If contemporary subjectivists seek to get rid of the idea of idea-critique, these proponents of an embellished version of classical Marxism, precisely because their primary reference is historical specificity, (implicitly or explicitly) assume that it is always already clear what the idea of critique is oriented by, namely by the analysis of specific historical contexts and their historically particular structures within the global movement of history. Critique in this understanding is motivated by the incessant movement of history that manifests in local practices and historically specific laboring conditions. One seems today to be thus also dealing with something like an automatism of critique (history cannot but

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1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Einleitung. Über das Wesen der philosophischen Kritik überhaupt und ihr Verhältnis zum gegenwärtigen Zustand der Philosophie insbesondere*, in: Hegel, *Jenaer Schriften 1801-1807, Werke*, Vol.2, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 173.

demonstrate that one needs to be critical of one's former beliefs), with a thesis about the completely new conditions of labor forces that overcome old conception of exploitation or production-processes and thereby engender at the same time new good reasons to be optimistic about the virtual (technological, practical, etc.) capacities of revolutionizing the system or much more profane: of being together. Already Arnold Ruge, who is clearly no Marxist's favorite thinker, argued against Hegel that one should always resist the move from a phenomenology of historically embedded, concrete existences to the unfolding of a transtemporal logic, in which universally valid categories are articulated. This is due to the fact, for Ruge, that any logic, even the logic (articulating something) of the idea is part of the waves that the ocean of history generates and hence can and has to be criticized, simply because there is and cannot be any universal, one might even say eternal, articulation of what an idea is that might orient critique. But the complete embracing of the absoluteness of historical specificity without remainder led to the effect that one absolutely has to affirm that there is no transhistorical absolute, in short: no idea. The sound demand of historical specificity of critique ended up endorsing historical relativism, a relativism that at the same time can only be upheld because one is led to believe in the stable and unalterable law of historical change. The peculiar effect of getting rid of the idea, of repudiating all universals whilst still seeking to endorse a critical endeavor is striking: one seeks to withdraw from any reference to the absolute or universal that would be able to guide the practice of critique, yet one either takes oneself or external objective processes of realization as absolute.

The present issue of "Crisis and Critique" firstly seeks to overcome such absolute rejection of anything absolute and gathers voices of thinkers who, writing solely in their own name, at the same time do not stand for the absoluteness of subjective opinion. Rather what the present issue undertakes is to fundamentally recast and investigate anew the idea of critique with an idea, the idea of idea-critique.

2. But how are we to locate the critique in our contemporary situation? In Greek, to criticize (*krinein*) has a multitude of meanings: it means for example to evaluate, to judge, to decide but it also means to demarcate, that is to say, to draw lines of separation. The word *crisis* is obviously related to *krinein* - that is to say, it is an effect of a decision, of a demarcation and differentiation. But this does not make critique a mere personal matter. Rather one can only, as already Plato argued, posit a difference, if one has the idea (not of difference but)

that one the two sides of the distinction entails a relation to the true and one side to the wrong. Critique thereby is fundamentally and in the last instance against all forms of subjectivism, against theoretical (or, philosophical) deviations. And it describes one the fundamental operations of philosophy: Philosophy is the site that thinks and draws lines of demarcations that do not simply originate in philosophy, but are also drawn elsewhere. Lines between science and ideology, between knowledge and opinion, between truth and opinion and even between truth and knowledge. it thereby registers the effects of the political struggle (its successes and failures), of scientific interventions, of artistic practices, and so forth. In this regard, one has to be critical of too swiftly aligning the Greek meaning of the term critique and Kant's understanding of it: since *krinein*, critique implies demarcation, the Kantian conception of critique, which obviously also entailed lines of demarcation endorsed the idea that there are conditions of possibility for drawing any kind of distinction and these lie beyond any critique, precisely because they ground it. Yet by asking on what grounds one can realize a critical enterprise, Kant in some sense explicated the idea of idea-critique. And he felt pressured to do so by the emerging tension between Modernism and religion, and also by the never ending struggles within the domain of philosophy. In this sense, it can be argued that the Kantian project rethought the entire philosophical tradition, it revamped it when it seemed to have entered into a period of crisis. Kant wrote his magnum opus in what can be called the transition of period between Enlightenment and Romanticism. He writes that "our age is the age of criticism, to which everything should be submitted." In a very similar manner, later Karl Marx called for a "ruthless criticism of everything existing." May one not assume that also today a revamping of precisely critique is what is urgently needed, in the Greek or Kantian sense? Are we not also in a time of transition, in transitory times, after the (Soviet, Chinese, Cuban, etc.) revolutions have failed and the idea of revolution makes no, but nostalgic, sense to anyone any longer?

3. In today's situation, one, as we contend, should insist on the reinvention of the process of "critique". We thereby do not simply propagate a simple return to previous forms of criticism, or a simple return to Kant. To the contrary, critique needs to be resurrected, even against all the forms of critique that previously existed. Its means have to be re-shaped. Hence we propagate a meta-critical stance. But, one does thereby not need to give up what Marx claimed, namely that critique operates via an exposé, via a peculiar form of presentation [*Darstellung*]

that *is by specific very means of presentation*. Thereby the presentation of a system is at the same time the critique of this very system and allows to draw lines of demarcation. We thus maintain that to criticize implies the emphasize of a choice that would not have existed without the critique - without the critical exposition the choice between what seems to be unchangeably given and 'something' else would not exist. And we add to this, that such a critical exposition can be linked to the very operation of philosophy. Contending that there is a contemporary relevance of critique thereby also implies to re-assert the contemporary significance of philosophy. Does present issue thus investigates what can, could or should be conceived of as critique? *Crisis and Critique* will affirm (but does not limit itself to) three forms of criticism: 1) critique of ideology, 2) criticism of religion and 3) critique of political economy.

4. The reinvention and resuscitation of both the notion of ideology as well as the procedure of its critique is of great importance. Affirming the ideology-critique does not mean to go back to standard Marxist conception of it, but it demands that we need to rethink the entire conceptual and analytic framework, within which it can be exercised. Unlike a few decades ago, our era is characterised by a lack of any radical alternative to global capitalism. It is not only the popular imagination, but also it is most of academics and political movements are caught up in inventing many political and economic programmes that function *under* the name of capitalism and therefore are inherent to its dynamics. The strangeness of our situation consists in the fact that what appears to us as a radical proposition is in fact a vehicle which always-already makes the system run smoothly. Radical theorists often display their radicality by shying away from any direct involvement with regard to either concrete political forms of action (as it might ruin the comfortable purity of their theory), over-identify with certain political movements (that thereby are turned into unfalsifiable paradigms of the theory itself) or simply return to previous theoretical stance. All this avoids the what Hegel once called the strenuous effort of the concept. The response of the most of Marxists to the on-going crisis of capitalism is the exemplary case of ideological mystification: the displacement from the structural problem of the totality of capitalism, to its phases of development or even worse to individual moral deprivations. However, ideology cannot be reduced only to the act of mystification of the social reality. Ideology is also that something by which people legitimise their political power based on false ideas, i.e. the rise of the right-wing nationalism in Europe. Ideology always appears as neutral presentation of the facts of a given situation, which makes a

specific form of engagement necessary for it to be criticized.

5. The critique of religion can be read as being correlative to ideology-critique. Philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and others have argued that the rise of both ethnic and religious passions is strictly related to the lack of the idea of emancipation. However, what is striking is not so much the rise of religious “fundamentalism”, but its practical impotence that often leads to violent or nihilist passages-à-’-actes. Its impotence relies on the fact that although the three big monotheistic religions implied great emancipatory potential (the creation of the new collectivities, etc), the contemporary manifestation of their doxa is the ultimate violation of that very potential. Žižek argues that in today’s situation, great public causes can no longer serve as the causes of great mass mobilisation - it is in the wake of this lack that a regres to religion emerged as means of compensation, it took over as sole heir to these ideals. Our era is characterised by a lack of any proper affirmative ideological (collective) project, although many ideological tendencies seek to implant and strengthen themselves in the social field as such. One of these tendencies clearly manifests in religious “fundamentalisms” and it can be argued that it is today fundamentally of reactionary nature: far from being able to provide a new vision of universality, or even of universal principles, the religious discourses have regressed to forms of life that even include specific dietaries and fashion. It is in this relation that we should understand the rise of religious passion as form of compensating the lack of any Idea of emancipation.

5. In addition to the critique of ideology and that of religion, and in agreement with Žižek, we argue that the critique of political economy is a *sine qua non* for any politics of emancipation. The current approaches to Marx and his *Capital* are usually partial: most of Marxist scholars, at least in the English-speaking world, mostly concentrate either on the analysis of the first chapter of his *Das Kapital*, or on the concept of the reproduction. However, the importance of the critique of political economy does not rely only on its function on critically analysing the capitalist mode of production and its nature, construction, forms and its functioning, as well as the transition from one mode of production to the other - its crucial importance relies exactly on the affirmation of the class struggle, on the reconceptualisation of phenomenas such as exploitation, domination, et cetera. The question that has to be rearticulated here has often been posed à propos Marx: Is Marx’s analysis of capitalism, as developed in his *Das Kapital* enough? Does

it provide the conceptual and analytical framework within which we can carry on our analysis, or do we need to rethink Marx's *oeuvre* as such? Marx's work and his analysis remain with us, they are of crucial importance, but nonetheless his limits are clearly discernible. In this regard, Marx cannot stand alone; while we need to maintain our fidelity to his concepts, the necessary dialectical reversal with which his work has to be supplemented is the opposite of what Marxists maintained during the previous century: one today needs to move from Marx to Hegel. It is only through Hegelian framework that we can reconceptualise and rethink Marxists concepts of exploitation, domination, class struggle and so forth. In other words, the thesis we propose is that the basis of contemporary critique of political economy should be ground on a renewed assessment of Hegelian dialectics and its framework.

6. Why Hegel then? Historically, because Hegel also unfolded and shaped his thought in a time of transition. The French Revolution had failed and Hegel, a life-long critical defender even of its violent and most radical aspects, clearly saw the need for philosophy to systematically grasp not only its internally grounded shortcomings and deadlocks but also the conceptual paths it opened and the consequences that have to be drawn from it. So, Hegel is our contemporary precisely due to this historical correlation. Yet, there is also a systematic reason: in the history of philosophy one will maybe find no other thinker who so radically unfolded all the implications and consequence of the affirmation of the thought of the absolute, of the idea. This is not to say that Hegel simply reframed from the world and its concrete existences into the ivory tower of a pure transhistorical logic, it rather means that for example Hegel's whole *Phenomenology of Spirit* depicts all the resistances that emerge when it comes to the question of how to think the absolute. Hegel depicted them in a - as often claimed: inconsistent - series of figures [Gestalten] of spirit. Yet, what all these figures share is that they in one way or the other resist thinking (the absolute). Hegel thereby provides a concrete catalogue of all those stances, figures, tendencies that one has to overcome when one seeks to affirm thought as such. Hegel thus provides a theory against the resistances against theory. This does not only make it possible to link Hegel to psychoanalysis, as many have argued already, but also shows Hegel's fundamental significance for today's situation: today nothing is more important than to return to the idea of an idea and therefore one needs the fundamental affirmation of thought. At the same time, this does not simply imply a return to Hegel comparable to the one that became predominant in academia and

academic philosophy, where liberal and Habermasian analytic Hegelians seem to reign autocratically nowadays. Rather the task that needs to be undertaken is to return to Hegel to re-shape Hegel such that he becomes intelligible as our contemporary - a task recently formulated and realized with regard to Plato by Alain Badiou - as contemporary of our transitory times, as contemporary of a times in which emancipatory projects have to be not only renewed but fundamentally reformulated. Although the obvious objection might be that this then could also imply to even endorse what is often called Hegel's own reactionary 'political philosophy' - if there is such a thing - which entails a conception of the state and even of republican monarchy. Is this not something that forever should be left in the trashbin of history? One might argue - and this work still needs to be done - that it is on the one hand of high importance for any emancipatory political project to entail a theory of the state - and Hegel is explicit about i, as the infamous owl of Minerva image at the end of the preface of the *Philosophy of Right* shows: the state Hegel conceptualizes is one that is declining, otherwise it could not be conceptualized. On the other hand, maybe - as Badiou and also Zizek have contended recently- the time has come for emancipatory thinkers to not shy away from the idea of political leadership and start a meta-critical rethinking of the very idea of the political leader (which in itself has nothing substantially fascist as is often argued: it rather plays an important role in many emancipatory movements within history).

7. The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* does not answer all of question, neither does it provide a handbook in which the solutions to all the tasks are mapped out. But it gathers thinkers that point towards important, maybe the most important, elements of the renewal of the thought of emancipation and one of its most fundamental categories, namely the category of critique. The question from which they all depart is: where do we stand today with regard to critique? The answers the subsequent articles offer, as should be clear, could therefore not have a greater relevance.

Answers to Today's Crisis: A Leninist View

Slavoj Žižek

Nietzsche wrote apropos *Hamlet*: “what must a person have suffered if he needs to be a clown that badly! – Is *Hamlet* understood? It is not doubt but *certainty* that drives you mad.”¹ There are two distinct propositions combined in this passage: Nietzsche's version of the old wisdom about despair that lurks behind the mask of a clown – Hamlet must suffer tremendously if he feels compelled to play a crazy clown; what makes him suffer, what drives him mad, is not his doubt but his certainty about who murdered his father, and his doubt, his search for the ultimate proof of Claudius' guilt, is an escape from his certainty. Another mode of escape from unbearable certainty can also be to indulge in what may appear as tasteless jokes. A Bosnian cultural analyst was surprised to discover that, within the circle of people whose relatives died in Srebrenica, dozens of jokes about the Serb massacre circulate. Here is one example (which refers to the way one was buying beef in old Yugoslavia – usually, the butcher asked “With or without bones?”, where bones were used to add to the meat for the beef soup): “I want to buy some land for a house close to Srebrenica – do you know what he prices are?” “Prices vary, they depend on what kind of land you want – with or without bones.” Far from expressing tasteless disrespect, such jokes are the only way to deal with the unbearably traumatic reality: they render quite adequately our helpless perplexity, belying all pathetic compassion with the victims as a truly tasteless blasphemy.

Recall Paul Robeson's later rewriting of his legendary “Ol' Man River,” a model of simple and efficient critico-ideological intervention. In the original version from the Hollywood musical *Showboat* (1936), the river (Mississippi) is presented as the embodiment of the enigmatic and indifferent Fate, an old wise man who “must know somethin', but don't say nothin’,” and just keeps rolling, retaining his silent wisdom. In the new version,² the river is no longer the bearer of an anonymous, unfathomable collective wisdom, but, rather, the bearer of collective *stupidity*, of the stupid, passive tolerance for meaningless suffering, and the victim's answer to it should be sovereign laughter - here are the final lines of the original song: “/.../ You gets a little drunk, / an' you land in jail. / But I gets weary, / and sick of tryin', / I'm tired of livin', / and scared of dyin'. / But ol' man river, / he just keeps rollin' along.” And here is the

¹ Nietzsche 2004: 40.

² Available in, among other recordings, the recording of his notorious Moscow concert in 1949 (*Russian Revelation*, RV 70004) with a brief spoken introduction by Robeson himself in perfect Russian.

changed version: “You show a little grit, / an’ you lands in jail. / But I keeps laughin’, / instead of cryin’, / I must keep fightin’, / until I’m dyin’. / And ol’ man river, / he’ll just keeps rollin’ along.”

A more radical strategy is that of de-realization. Apropos the big trench battles of the First World War (the Great War) like Ypres and Somme where hundreds of thousands died for a gain of a couple of hundreds of yards, Paul Fussell pointed out how the very incredibility of what went on made the participants experience their situation as theatrical: it was impossible for them to believe that they are taking part in such a murderous endeavor in person, as “themselves,” the whole affair was all too extremely farcical, perverse, cruel and absurd to perceive it as a form of their “real lives.” In other words, the experience of the war as a theatrical performance enabled the participants to escape from the reality of what went on, it allowed them to follow their orders and perform their military duties without involving into it their “true self,” and, in this way, without having to abandon their innermost conviction that the real world is still a rational place and not a madhouse of their daily lives.³

It is a commonplace that the Great War functioned as an immense shock, encounter of the Real, which signaled the end of an entire civilization: although everyone was expecting it, everyone was no less surprised when the war actually exploded, and (an even more enigmatic fact) this very surprise was fast re-normalized, war became a new way of life. How was this re-normalization achieved? As expected, with the massive use of ancient ideological myths and narratives which made the war appear as part of normal flow of things: the no-man’s-land between the trenches full of unexploded mines, holes and desolation, became a new version of the Waste Land from the Grail myth, etc.⁴ This mobilization of ancient myths and legends is the ultimate proof of the traumatic novelty of the Great War: precisely because something unheard-of took place, all ancient myths had to be put to work to account for this novelty. Of course, the character of these myths is more often the paranoid fantasy tale than a proper symbolic narrative – to paraphrase Lacan, what is too traumatic to be integrated into the Symbolic returns in the Real as a paranoid construct or hallucination. No wonder the Great War triggered an explosion of interpretive paranoia

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³ See Fussell: 2000.

⁴ I rely here on Fussell, op.cit.

- its problem was the same as that of Stalinism: how to account for the embarrassing fact of so many failures of our allegedly best system? The Stalinist answer was: counter-revolutionary plots and traitors everywhere, and similar is the answer of Reginald Grant’s *S.O.S.*, published in the course of the war, an unsurpassed collection of lies, legends and myths, all taken extremely seriously. Grant’s problem is a simple one: he cannot believe that Germans can be as astute as they are in locating the targets for their artillery across the enemy line by means of analyzing the sound and lightning of the enemy fire, so the only solution was for him that the Belgian countryside behind the British lines was full of treacherous farmers who were signaling the locations of the British guns to the Germans. They were doing this in a series of ways: (1) wind mills which all of a sudden start to turn in the direction opposite to the direction of the wind (incidentally, this idea was used in a famous scene from Hitchcock’s WWII thriller *Foreign Correspondent*: the good guys who are following a Nazi agent find themselves in an idyllic Dutch with wind mills; everything seems peaceful, there is no trace of the agent, when one of the good guys detects the stain which sticks out of the picture, denaturalizing it – he exclaims: “Look at that windmill! Why is it turning opposite the direction of the wind?”, and the idyllic countryside loses its innocence and becomes semiotically charged); (2) the hour hands on local church towers are set out of sync with the actual time; (3) when housewives hang their laundry to dry on the ropes in front of their houses, the disposition of the colors of the laundry (two white shirts, then one black...) also sends a coded signal.

The problem is how to distinguish this false (ideological) paranoia from the basic paranoid stance which is an irreducible ingredient of every critique of ideology. On a beach in a Mediterranean country, I was shown a lone fisherman repairing a network; while the idea of my hosts was to demonstrate traditional labor based on artisanal ancient experience and wisdom, my immediate reaction to its display was paranoia: what I saw in front of me, was a staged authenticity, a spectacle made to impress tourists, like preparing fresh food in department stores or other cases of the false transparency of the production process? What if, when one gets too close to the network, one sees a small sign “made in China” and one notices that the “authentic” fisherman is just mimicking productive gestures? Or, even better, what if we re-imagine the scene as a detail from some Hitchcock film: the fisherman is a foreign agent and he is weaving the network in a specially coded way so that another agent will decode in it a secret

(terrorist) message (again, like the windmill turning the wrong way in Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent*)?

But the most brilliant hallucinatory legend of the Great War was the persistent rumor that, somewhere in the no-man's-land between the trenches of the frontlines, in this desolate waste land of barren scorched earth full of rotting corpses, holes full of water made by artillery grenades exploding, abandoned trenches, caves and tunnels, gangs of half-crazy deserters live. They are composed of members of all participating armies and nations: Germans, French, British, Australians, Poles, Croats, Belgians, Italians – they lived their hidden lives in friendship and peace, avoiding detection and helping each other. Living in rags, with long beards, they never allowed themselves to be seen – from time to time, one just heard their crazy shouts and songs. They came out of their subterranean netherworld only during the night after a battle in order to scavenge the corpses and collect water and food. The beauty of this legend is that it clearly describes a kind of alternate community, a great NO to the madness going on the battlefield: a group in which members of the warring nations live in peace with each other, their only enemy being war itself. While they may appear as an image of war at its most crazy – outcasts living a wild life –, they are simultaneously its self-negation, literally an island of peace between the front lines, the emergence of universal fraternity that ignores these lines. Precisely by ignoring the official lines of division between Us and Them, they stand for the real division, the only one that matters, i.e., the negation of the entire space of imperialist warfare. They are the Third element which belies the false duality of the War – in short, they are the true Leninists in the situation, repeating Lenin's gesture of the refusal to be drawn into patriotic fervor.

And this is our task, today more than ever: to discern the true division in the *melee* of secondary struggles. Here are two extreme cases of the false division. The ideological struggle in Peru at the time of the *Shining Path* rebellion (1980-1992) perfectly rendered the political deadlock in which the country was caught. On the one side, "the collective identity of the Shining Path was educational,"⁵ even their most brutal violence "had the purpose of educating the people about the revolution and the state about its impending doom"⁶; this education was

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5 Shadle 2013: 293.

6 Op.cit., ibid.

utterly authoritarian, exerted by those who believed they possessed the truth and usurped the right to have absolute power over their students. On the opposite side, the government's counter-strategy was even more ominous: a strategy of pure political demobilization and demoralization. The press controlled and/or manipulated by the state power actively promoted what analysts called "mean world syndrome": the government solicited an explosion of *prensa chicha*, tabloid newspapers specializing in celebrity gossip and crime stories, plus TV talk shows that focused on "real cases" of drug addiction, family violence and adultery, etc. The goal of this strategy was to "socially immobilize people through fear and /to/ atomize the public sphere"⁷ – the message rendered was that the world is a dangerous place in which all one can do is look out for oneself since there is no hope for solidarity, just envy of the rich and famous and pleasure at their troubles. Rarely in modern history was the ideological space of a country so neatly divided into "totalitarian" educationalism, which submerges individuals into a political collective demanding total self-sacrifice and atomized egotism, which impedes any formation of engaged collective solidarity, with traditional liberalism reduced to a dwindling side-show. Although this division is pure and radical, there is no place in it for authentic emancipatory politics.

Another false struggle concerns the status of anti-Semitism and Zionism today. For some pro-Muslim Leftists, Zionism is the exemplary case of today's neocolonial racism, which is why the Palestinian struggle against Israel is the paradigm for all other anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles. In a strictly inverted way, for some Zionists, anti-Semitism (which, for them, lurks in every critique of Zionism) is the exemplary case of today's racism, so that, in both cases, Zionism (or anti-Semitism) is the particular form of racism which colors all others, which determines the specific weight of the entire field of racism today – the true test of anti-racism today is to fight anti-Semitism (or Zionism), i.e., without fully endorsing this particular struggle, one is accused of secretly playing the racist game (and, in a step further in the same direction, any critical remark about Islam is equated with "Islamophobia"). While enough was written about the deeply problematic nature of equating any critique of the Zionist politics of the State of Israel with anti-Semitism, one should also render problematic the elevation of Zionism into neo-imperialist racism *par excellence*. When I recently asked a radically-Leftist friend of mine why elevate Zionism

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7 Op.cit., p. 295.

into racism par excellence, and Zionist oppression of the Palestinians into the paradigmatic case of today's imperialist oppression, while there are doubtless around the world many cases of a much more brutal oppression, my friend replied that this elevation is the result of the ongoing struggle for hegemony which no one can control – as he literally put it, Jews were “chosen” to be this exemplary case, and we have to follow this logic... this is what I find deeply problematic. When one specific ethnic group is “chosen” as a symbol (or the personification) of a universal negative attitude, this is never a neutral operation but a choice within a well-defined space of ideological tradition. Jews were already chosen twice in their history, first as the “chosen people” by God himself (in their religious view), then as the target of anti-Semitism, as the personification of moral corruption, so that any further “choice” has to be read against the background of the echoes of these previous choices.⁸ If the Jewish state, doing things which are without doubt ethico-politically deeply problematic, but which are nonetheless less gruesome than what many other states are doing, is “chosen” as the emblem of what is wrong in our world, then the surplus of libidinal energy that enables us to elevate its criminal status to the universal symbol can only come from the (anti-Semitic) past. And what is wrong in this “choice” is, again, is the disavowal of the class struggle.

Alessandro Russo has shown⁹ how the Radical Left of the 1960s was defined by the vacillation between “meta-classism” (adopting a position above class division: multitude, people and not just class, the unity of all progressive or patriotic forces excluding only traitors...¹⁰) and “hyper-classism” (focusing on a part of the working class as the privileged revolutionary agent (“cognitariat,” “precariat,” illegal immigrants...)). It seems that, today, one can discern the same vacillation

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8 Far from being simply located on the margins of Europe, did the Jews not emerge in the XXth century as a kind of all-European *Ur-Vater*, the chief of the pre-Oedipal gang? Exactly as in Freud's myth about the murder of the primordial father, they were collectively killed by Europeans (holocaust as the ultimate crime) in order to reemerge as the superego agency making all Europeans guilty.

9 In his intervention at the fourth “The Idea of Communism” meeting in Seoul, September 27-29 2013.

10 Contrary to what one would expect, the accent on class politics does not necessarily entail “totalitarianism.” The apparently more “open” Popular Front Communist policy (Stalin in the 1930s, Mao in the 1940s) advocated a united front of all progressive forces inclusive of the “patriotic bourgeoisie,” with (only) the exclusion of traitors to the country. The paradox is that such “open” policy of the national unity of all patriotic forces was effectively much more “totalitarian”: in a proto-Fascist way, it established the all-national unity, the overcoming of “sectarian” class distinctions, but at the price of demonizing and excluding the Enemy from the national body – this Enemy is not just a class enemy but a traitor to the nation as such, like Jews in Fascism whose elimination can only guarantee national harmony.

in Toni Negri's work: multitude versus Empire AND workers against capital. The problem with the first couple is: where in it is the place for capital? Sometimes Negri implicitly identifies the two couples, talking about (capitalist) governance versus (proletarian) multitude; sometimes he discerns in the “deterritorializing” functioning of today's most dynamic capitalism (up to financial speculations) the dimension of multitude, concluding that in the most advanced forms of capitalism we are “almost there,” in Communism, we just have to drop off the capitalist form.

The problem that lurks beneath this vacillation is a crucial one: the problem of defining what division really divides today if it is no longer the traditional class divide (multitude and governance is not strong enough to play this role). What if it is still class struggle, but with the expansion of the scope of proletariat which should no longer be focused on the traditional working class but include all those who are exploited today: workers, unemployed and –able, “precariat,” “cognitariat,” illegal immigrants, slum dwellers, “rogue states” excluded from “civilized” space...¹¹ (We should bear in mind here that there is already a subtle subterranean difference between working class and proletariat discernible in Marx: “working class” is ultimately an empirical category designating a part of society (wage workers), while proletariat is a more formal category designating the “part of no-part” of the social body, the point of its symptomatic torsion or, as Marx put it, the un-reason within reason – rational structure of a society – itself.) This is why, as Alain Badiou recently proposed¹² in an ironic but simultaneously serious way, one should search today for the “principal contradiction” *within* the people (classes) themselves, not between the people and the Enemies of the people, or between people and the State: the primordial fact is a split/antagonism in the very heart of the “people.”

Rage and depression in the global village

How are we to proceed in such conditions? A century ago, G.K. Chesterton made some useful comments about movements for radical

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11 Those who claim that working class is disappearing are in a way right – it is disappearing from our sight. There is a new working class emerging all around us from the Emirates to South Korea, a nomadic class of invisible immigrant workers separated from their homes and families, living in isolated dormitories in the suburbs of prosperous cities, with almost no political or legal rights, no healthcare or retirement arrangements. To mobilize them and to enable them to organize themselves for an emancipatory cause would have been a true political event.

12 In a debate at the fourth “The Idea of Communism” meeting in Seoul, September 27-29 2013.

social change:

“Let us ask ourselves first what we really do want, not what recent legal decisions have told us to want, or recent logical philosophies proved that we must want, or recent social prophecies predicted that we shall someday want. If there is to be Socialism, let it be social; that is, as different as possible from all the big commercial departments of today. The really good journeyman tailor does not cut his coat according to his cloth; he asks for more cloth. The really practical statesman does not fit himself to existing conditions, he denounces the conditions as unfit.”¹³

Such (perhaps too idealized and therefore false) consequentiality is what is conspicuously absent from the rage exploding all around Europe today – this rage

“is impotent and inconsequential, as consciousness and coordinated action seem beyond the reach of present society. Look at the European crisis. Never in our life have we faced a situation so charged with revolutionary opportunities. Never in our life have we been so impotent. Never have intellectuals and militants been so silent, so unable to find a way to show a new possible direction.”¹⁴

Berardi locates the origin of this impotence in the exploding speed of the functioning of the big Other (the symbolic substance of our lives) and the slowness of human reactivity (due to culture, corporeality, diseases, etc.): “the long-lasting neoliberal rule has eroded the cultural bases of social civilization, which was the progressive core of modernity. And this is irreversible. We have to face it.”¹⁵ Outbursts of impotent rage bear witness to the devastating effects of global capitalist ideology which combines individualist hedonism with frantic competitive work rhythm, thereby closing the space for coordinated collective actions. Recall the great wave of protests that spilled all over Europe in 2011, from Greece and Spain, to London and Paris. Even if there was

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13 Chesterton, “The Man Who Thinks Backwards,” <http://www.catholic-forum.com/Saints/gkc13004.htm>, the last paragraph.

14 Berardi 2011: 175. But is this inconsequentiality really a new phenomenon? Are “bland revolutions” not for centuries part of our tradition, from medieval peasant revolts to Chartists etc.? In November 1914, Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa entered Mexico City with their troops... and, after a couple of weeks of debates, left for home, basically not knowing what to do with their power.

15 Op.cit., p. 177.

mostly no consistent political program mobilizing the protesters, the protests did function as parts of a large-scale educational process: the protesters' misery and discontent were transformed into a great collective act of mobilization – hundreds of thousands gathered in public squares, proclaiming that they had enough, that things cannot go on like that. However, such protests, although they constitute individuals participating in them as universal political subjects, remain at the level of purely formal universality: what these protests stage is a purely negative gesture of angry rejection and an equally abstract demand for justice, lacking the ability to translate this demand into a concrete political program. In short, these protests were not yet proper political acts, but abstract demands addressed at an Other from which it is expected to act... What can be done in such a situation where demonstrations and protests are of no use, where democratic elections are of no use? Only withdrawal, passivity, abandonment of illusions can open a new way: “Only self-reliant communities leaving the field of social competition can open a way to a new hope.”¹⁶

One cannot but note the cruel irony of this contrast between Berardi and Hardt and Negri. Hardt and Negri celebrate “cognitive capitalism” as opening up a path towards “absolute democracy,” since the object, the “stuff,” of immaterial work are more and more social relations themselves: “What the multitude produces is not just goods or services; the multitude also and most importantly produces cooperation, communication, forms of life, and social relationships.”¹⁷ In short, immaterial production is directly biopolitical; the production of social life. It was already Marx who emphasized how material production is always also the (re)production of the social relations within which it occurs; with today's capitalism, however, the production of social relations is the immediate end/goal of production: “Such new forms of labor /.../ present new possibilities for economic self-management, since the mechanisms of cooperation necessary for production are contained in the labor itself.”¹⁸ The wager of Hardt and Negri is that this directly socialized, immaterial production, not only renders owners progressively superfluous (who needs them when production is directly

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16 Op.cit.,:176.

17 Hardt & Negri 2004: 339.

18 Op.cit., :336.

social, formally and as to its content?); the producers also master the regulation of social space, since social relations (politics) IS the stuff of their work: economic production directly becomes political production, the production of society itself. The way is thus open for “absolute democracy,” for the producers directly regulating their social relations without even the detour of democratic representation. The illusion at work here was succinctly formulated by Althusser, when he noted how Marx never managed to relinquish the “mythical idea of Communism as a *mode of production without relations of production*; in Communism, the free development of individuals takes the place of social relations in the mode of production.”¹⁹ Is this idea of Communism as a “as a mode of production without relations of production,” also not what motivates Negri and Hardt? When social relations (inclusive of relations of production) are directly produced by social production, they are no longer social relations proper (i.e., a structural frame, given in advance, within which social production takes place), but become directly planned and produced and as such totally transparent.

Berardi's conclusion is exactly the opposite one: far from bringing out potential transparency of social life, today's “cognitive capitalism” makes it more impenetrable than ever, undermining the very subjective conditions of any form of collective solidarity of the “cognitariat.”²⁰ What is symptomatic here is the way the same conceptual apparatus leads to two radically opposed conclusions. Berardi warns us against what he calls the Deleuzian “gospel of hyper-dynamic deterritorialization” – for him, if we are not able to step outside the compulsion of the system, the gap between the frantic dynamics imposed by the system and our corporeal and cognitive limitations sooner or later brings about the fall in depression. Berardi makes this point apropos Felix Guattari, his personal friend, who, in theory, preached the gospel of hyper-dynamic deterritorialization, while personally suffering long bouts of depression:

“Actually the problem of depression and of exhaustion is never elaborated in an explicit way by Guattari. I see here a crucial problem

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¹⁹ Althusser 2006: 37.

²⁰ With all the growing importance of intellectual work, we should never lose from sight the massive displacement of physical work to China, Indonesia, etc. – but does this global outsourcing of material work really allow us to maintain the so-called “labor theory of value”? Is knowledge as a factor of value not a fact today, a fact foretold long ago by Marx?

of the theory of desire: the denial of the problem of limits in the organic sphere. /.../ The notion of the ‘body without organs’ hints at the idea that the organism isn't something that you can define, that the organism is a process of exceeding, of going beyond a threshold, of ‘becoming other.’ This is a crucial point, but it's also a dangerous point. /.../ What body, what mind is going through transformation and becoming? Which invariant lies under the process of becoming other? If you want to answer this question you have to acknowledge death, finitude, and depression.”²¹

Depression, finitude, exhaustion, etc., are here not empirico-psychological categories, but indications of a basic ontological limitation - when Berardi talks of depression, it is with regard to interpellation proper, i.e., a reaction of the human animal to the Cause which addresses us, specifically with regard to late capitalist interpellation, but *also* with regard to the emancipatory mobilization. Does this imply a resigned surrender to the hegemonic power structure? No – there is nothing inherently “conservative” in being tired of the usual radical Leftist demands for permanent mobilization and active participation, demands which follow the superego logic – the more we obey them, the more we are guilty... The battle has to be won **HERE**, in the domain of citizen's passivity, when things return back to normal the morning after ecstatic revolts: it is (relatively) easy to have a big ecstatic spectacle of sublime unity, but how will ordinary people feel the difference in their ordinary daily lives? No wonder conservatives like to see, from time to time, sublime explosions – they remind people that nothing can really change, that the day after things return to normal.

But things go even further here: nature itself is today in disorder, not because it overwhelms our cognitive capacities but primarily because we are not able to master the effects of our own interventions into its course – who knows what the ultimate consequences of our biogenetic engineering or of global warming will be? The surprise comes from ourselves, it concerns the opacity of how we ourselves fit into the picture: the impenetrable stain in the picture is not some cosmic mystery like a mysterious explosion of a supernova, the stain are we ourselves, our collective activity. It is against this background that one should understand Jacques-Alain Miller's thesis: “*Il y'a un grand*

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²¹ Berardi, op.cit., p. 177-8.

desordre dans le reel."²² "There is a great disorder in the real." That's how Miller characterizes the way reality appears to us in our time in which we experience the full impact of two fundamental agents, modern science and capitalism. Nature, as the real in which everything, from stars to the sun, always returns to its proper place, as the realm of large reliable cycles and of stable laws regulating them, is being replaced by a thoroughly contingent real, real outside the Law, real that is permanently revolutionizing its own rules, real that resists any inclusion into a totalized World (universe of meaning), which is why Badiou characterized capitalism as the first world-less civilization.

How should we react to this constellation? Should we assume a defensive approach, and search for a new limit, a return to (or, rather, the invention of) some new balance? This is what bioethics endeavors to do with regard to biotechnology, this is why the two form a couple: biotechnology pursues new possibilities of scientific interventions (genetic manipulations, cloning...), and bioethics endeavors to impose moral limitations on what biotechnology enables us to do. As such, bioethics is not imminent to scientific practice: it intervenes into this practice from outside, imposing external morality onto it. But is bioethics not precisely the betrayal of the ethics immanent to scientific endeavor, the ethics of "do not compromise your scientific desire, follow inexorably its path"? A new limit is also what the slogan of the Porto Allegro protesters "a new world is possible" basically amounts to, and even ecology offers itself at this point as the provider of a new limit ("we cannot go further in our exploitation of nature, nature will not tolerate it, it will collapse..."). Or, should we follow the above-mentioned opposite path (of Deleuze and Negri, among others) and posit that capitalist disorder still too much order, obeying the capitalist law of the surplus-value appropriation, so that the task is not to limit it but to push it beyond its limitation? In other words, should we risk here also a paraphrase of Mao's well-known motto: there is disorder in the real, so situation is excellent? Perhaps, the path to follow is this one, although not in exactly the sense advocated by Deleuze and Negri in their celebration of de-territorialization? Miller claims that the pure lawless Real resists symbolic grasp, so that we should always be aware that our attempts to conceptualize it are mere semblances, defensive elubrifications - but what if there is still an underlying *order* that generates this disorder, a matrix that provides its coordinates? This is what also

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22 Miller 2013: 18.

accounts for the repetitive sameness of the capitalist dynamics: the more that things change, the more everything remains the same. And this is also why the obverse of the breath-taking capitalist dynamics is a clearly recognizable order of hierarchic domination.

Mamihlapinatapei

We should follow T.J. Clark²³ in his rejection of the eschatological notion of Future, which Marxism inherited from the Christian tradition, and whose most concise version is rendered by Hölderlin's well-known lines: "Where there is danger, that which saves is also rising." Perhaps, therein resides the lesson of the terrifying experiences of the XXth century Left, the experience which compels us to return from Marx back to Hegel, i.e., from the Marxist revolutionary eschatology back to Hegel's tragic vision of a history which forever remains radically open since the historical process always redirects our activity into an unexpected direction. Perhaps, the Left should learn to assume fully the basic "alienation" of the historical process: we cannot control the consequences of our acts – not because we are just puppets in the hands of some secret Master or Fate which pulls the strings, but for precisely the opposite reason: there is no big Other, no agent of total accountancy who or which can take into account the consequences of our own acts. This acceptance of "alienation" in no way entails a cynical distance; it implies a fully engaged position aware of the risks involved – there is no higher historical Necessity whose instruments we are and which guarantees the final outcome of our interventions. From this standpoint, our despair at the present deadlock appears in a new light: we have to renounce the very eschatological scheme which underlies our despair: there will never be a Left magically transforming confused revolts and protests into one big consistent Project of Salvation, all we have is our activity open to all the risks of an open contingent history.

Does this mean that we should simply abandon the topic (and experience) of "living in the end time," of approaching the apocalyptic point of no return when "things cannot go on like this any longer"? That we should replace it with the happy liberal-progressive "post-metaphysical" view of modest risky but cautious pragmatic interventions? No, the thing to do is to separate apocalyptic experience from eschatology: we are now approaching a certain zero-point – ecologically, economically, socially... -, things will change, the change

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23 See Clark no.74 (March/April 2012).

will be most radical if we do nothing, but there is no eschatological turn ahead pointing towards the act of global Salvation. In politics, an authentic Event is not the Event traditional Marxists are waiting for (the big Awakening of the revolutionary Subject), but something that occurs as an unexpected side-event. Remember how, just months before the 1917 revolutionary upheaval in Russia, Lenin gave a speech to the Swiss socialist youth, where he told them that their generation may be the first one to witness a socialist revolution in a couple of decades.

So let us conclude with going back to the protests in two neighboring countries, Greece and Turkey. In a first approach, they may seem to be entirely different: Greece is caught in the ruinous politics of austerity, while Turkey enjoys economic boom and is emerging as a new regional superpower. What if, however, each Turkey generates, and contains, its own Greece, its own islands of misery? In one of his “Hollywood Elegies,” Brecht wrote about this village, as he calls it:

“The village of Hollywood was planned according to the notion
People in these parts have of heaven. In these parts
They have come to the conclusion that God
Requiring a heaven and a hell, didn’t need to
Plan two establishments but
Just the one: heaven. It
Serves the unprosperous, unsuccessful
As hell.”

Does the same not hold for today’s global village, exemplarily for villages like Qatar or Dubai with glamour for the rich, and near-slavery for the immigrant workers? No wonder, then, that a closer look reveals the underlying similarity between Turkey and Greece: privatization, enclosure of public spaces, dismantling of social services, the rise of authoritarian politics (compare the threat of closing down the public TV in Greece to signs of censorship in Turkey). At this elementary level, Greek and Turkish protesters are engaged in the same struggle. The true event would, thus, have been to coordinate the two struggles, to reject “patriotic” temptations, to refuse to worry other’s worries (about Greece and Turkey as historical enemies), and to organize common manifestations of solidarity.

Perhaps, the very future of the ongoing protests depends on the ability to organize such global solidarity. The Fuengian language spoken in parts of Chile has a wonderful expression, *mamihlapinatapei*: a shared

look between two persons – say, in our case, a protesting Greek and a protesting Turk - who are both interested in contact, yet neither is willing to make the first move. But, someone will have to take a risk and do it. And the ongoing events in Ukraine should also be interpreted in this light.

Lenin in Ukraine

In TV reports on the mass protests in Kiev against the government of Yanukovich, we saw again and again the scene of enraged protesters tearing down statues of Lenin. These furious attacks were understandable insofar as Lenin’s statues functioned as a symbol of the Soviet oppression, and Putin’s Russia is perceived as a continuation of the Soviet policy of subjecting non-Russian nations to Russian domination. One should also bear in mind the precise historical moment when Lenin’s statues start to proliferate in thousands all around Soviet Union: until 1956, Stalin’s statues were much more numerous, and only in 1956, after Stalin’s denunciation at the XXth Congress of the Communist Party, Stalin’s statues were *en masse* replaced by Lenins – Lenin was literally a stand-in for Stalin, as it was made clear also by a weird thing that happened in 1962 to the front page of *Pravda*, the official Soviet daily newspaper. Before the *public* rejection of Stalin at the XXIIth Congress of the Communist Party in 1962, the title “PRAVDA” was accompanied by a drawing of two profiles, Lenin’s and Stalin’s, side by side; what happened after was not what one would have expected, i.e., just the one profile of Lenin — instead, there were two identical profiles of Lenin printed side by side. In this weird repetition, Stalin was in a way more present than ever in his absence, since his shadowy presence was the answer to the obvious question: “why Lenin twice, why not just one Lenin?”

There was nonetheless a deep irony in watching Ukrainians tearing down Lenin’s statues as a sign of their will to break with Soviet domination and assert their national sovereignty: the golden era of Ukraine’s national identity was not the Tsarist Russia (where Ukrainian self-assertion as a nation was thwarted), but the first decade of the Soviet Union when they established their full national identity - here is the Wikipedia passage on Ukraine in the 1920s:

“The civil war that eventually brought the Soviet government to power devastated Ukraine. It left over 1.5 million people dead and hundreds of thousands homeless. In addition, Soviet Ukraine had

to face the famine of 1921. Seeing an exhausted Ukraine, the Soviet government remained very flexible during the 1920s. Thus, under the aegis of the Ukrainization policy pursued by the national Communist leadership of Mykola Skrypnyk, Soviet leadership encouraged a national renaissance in literature and the arts. The Ukrainian culture and language enjoyed a revival, as Ukrainization became a local implementation of the Soviet-wide policy of '*korenization*' (literally *indigenisation*) policy. The Bolsheviks were also committed to introducing universal health care, education and social-security benefits, as well as the right to work and housing. Women's rights were greatly increased through new laws designed to wipe away centuries-old inequalities. Most of these policies were sharply reversed by the early 1930s after Joseph Stalin gradually consolidated power to become the *de facto* communist party leader."

This "indigenization" followed the principles formulated by Lenin in quite unambiguous terms:

"The proletariat cannot but fight against the forcible retention of the oppressed nations within the boundaries of a given state, and this is exactly what the struggle for the right of self-determination means. The proletariat must demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nations that 'its own' nation oppresses. Unless it does this, proletarian internationalism will remain a meaningless phrase; mutual confidence and class solidarity between the workers of the oppressing and oppressed nations will be impossible."²⁴

Lenin remained faithful to this position to the end: immediately after the October Revolution, he engaged in a polemic with Rosa Luxemburg who advocated allowing small nations to be given full sovereignty only if progressive forces will predominate in the new state, while Lenin was for unconditional right to secede, even if the "bad guys" will be in power in the new state. In his last struggle against Stalin's project for the centralized Soviet Union, Lenin again advocated the unconditional right of small nations to secede (in this case, Georgia was at stake), insisting on the full sovereignty of the national entities that composed the Soviet State - no wonder that, on September 27

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²⁴ Lenin, "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination" (January-February 1916)

1922, in a letter to the members of the Politburo, Stalin openly accused Lenin of "national liberalism." The direction in which Stalin's wind was already blowing is clear from how Stalin proposed to enact the decision to simply proclaim the government of the RSFSR also the government of the other five republics (Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia):

"If the present decision is confirmed by the Central Committee of the RCP, it will not be made public, but communicated to the Central Committees of the Republics for circulation among the Soviet organs, the Central Executive Committees or the Congresses of the Soviets of the said Republics before the convocation of the All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, where it will be declared to be the wish of these Republics."²⁵

The interaction of the higher authority (the CC) with its base is, thus, not only abolished, so that the higher authority imply imposes its will; to add insult to injury, it is re-staged as its opposite: the Central Committee decides what the base will ask the higher authority to enact as if it were its own wish. Recall the most conspicuous case of such re-staging from 1939, when the three Baltic States freely asked to join the Soviet Union, which granted their wish. What Stalin did in the early 1930s was thus simply a return to the pre-revolutionary tsarist foreign and national policy (for example, as part of this turn, the Russian colonization of Siberia and Muslim Asia was no longer condemned as imperialist expansion, but was celebrated as the introduction of progressive modernization that set in motion the inertia of these traditional societies). And Putin's foreign policy is a clear continuation of this tsarist-Stalinist line: after the Russian Revolution of 1917, according to Putin, it was the turn of the Bolsheviks to aggrieve Russia:

"The Bolsheviks, for a number of reasons - may God judge them - added large sections of the historical South of Russia to the Republic of Ukraine. This was done with no consideration for the ethnic makeup of the population, and today these areas form the southeast of Ukraine."

No wonder we can see Stalin's portraits again during military parades and public celebrations, while Lenin is obliterated; in a large

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²⁵ Quoted from Lewin 2005: 61.

opinion poll from a couple of years ago, Stalin was voted the third greatest Russian of all times, while Lenin was nowhere to be seen. Stalin is not celebrated as a Communist, but as a restorer of Russia's greatness after Lenin's anti-patriotic "deviation." No wonder Putin recently used the term "*Novorussiya* (New Russia)" for the six south-eastern counties of Ukraine, resuscitating a term out of use from 1917... The Leninist undercurrent, although repressed, nonetheless continued to live in the Communist underground opposition to Stalin. Although Communist critics of Stalinism were for sure full of illusions, long before Solzhenytsin "the crucial questions about the Gulag were being asked by left oppositionists, from Boris Souvarine to Victor Serge to C.L.R. James, in real time and at great peril. Those courageous and prescient heretics have been somewhat written out of history (they expected far worse than that, and often received it)."²⁶ This large-scale, critical movement was inherent to the Communist movement, in clear contrast to Fascism: "nobody can be bothered to argue much about whether fascism might have turned out better, given more propitious circumstances. And there were no dissidents in the Nazi Party, risking their lives on the proposition that the Fuehrer had betrayed the true essence of National Socialism."²⁷ Precisely because of this immanent tension at the very heart of the Communist movement, the most dangerous place to be in the time of the terrible 1930s purges in the Soviet Union was the top of the *nomenklatura* (in a couple of years, 80% of the Central Committee and Red Army Headquarters members were shot).²⁸ Furthermore, one should also not underestimate the "totalitarian" potential, as well as direct outright brutality, of the White counter-revolutionary forces during the Civil War: had the White victory been the case,

"the common word for fascism would have been a Russian one, not an Italian one. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was brought to the

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²⁶ Hitchens 2011: 634.

²⁷ Op.cit.,: 635.

²⁸ Another sign of this immanent tension is the fact that, in the last days of the Really Existing Socialism, the protesting crowds often sang the official songs, including national anthems, reminding the powers of their unfulfilled promises. What better thing for an East German crowd to do in 1989 than to simply sing the GDR national anthem? Because its words ("Deutschland einig Vaterland" / Germany, the united Fatherland") no longer fitted the emphasis on East Germans as a new Socialist nation, it was prohibited to sing it in public from late 50s to 1989: at the official ceremonies, only the orchestral version was performed. (The GDR was thus a unique country in which singing the national anthem was a criminal act!). Can one imagine the same thing under Nazism?

West by the White emigration [...]. Major General William Graves, who commanded the American Expeditionary Force during the 1918 invasion of Siberia (an event thoroughly airbrushed from all American textbooks), wrote in his memoirs about the pervasive, lethal anti-Semitism that dominated the Russian right wing and added, 'I doubt if history will show any country in the world during the last fifty years where murder could be committed so safely, and with less danger of punishment, than in Siberia during the reign of Kolchak.'"²⁹

No wonder that Kolchak was recently celebrated as an honorable Russian patriot and soldier in a big biopic *Admiral* (Andrei Kravchuk, 2008). And, as if echoing this dark past, the entire European neo-Fascist Right (in Hungary, France, Italy, Serbia...) is firmly supporting Russia in the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, belying the official Russian presentation of the Crimean referendum as a choice between Russian democracy and Ukrainian Fascism. The ongoing events in Ukraine - the massive protests which toppled Yanukovich and his gang - are thus to be understood as a defense against this dark legacy resuscitated by Putin: they were triggered by the Ukrainian government's decision to give priority to good relations with Russia over the integration of Ukraine into the European Union. Predictably, many anti-imperialist Leftists reacted to the news with their usual patronizing of the poor Ukrainians: how deluded they are, still idealizing Europe, not being able to see that Europe is in decline, and that joining European Union will just made Ukraine an economic colony of Western Europe, sooner or later pushed into the position of Greece... What these Leftists ignore is that Ukrainians were far from blind about the reality of the European Union, they were fully aware of its troubles and disparities - their message was simply that their own situation is much worse. Europe's problem are still rich man's problems - remember that, in spite of the terrible predicament of Greece, African refugees are still arriving there *en masse*, causing the ire of Rightist patriots.

Should we, then, simply support the Ukrainian side of the ongoing conflict? There is even a "Leninist" reason to do it. Recall how, in Lenin's very last writings, long after he renounced his utopia of *State and Revolution*, one can discern the contours of a modest "realistic" project of what the Bolshevik power should do. Because of the economic underdevelopment and cultural backwardness of the Russian masses,

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²⁹ Hitchens, op.cit., ibid.

there is no way for Russia to “pass directly to Socialism”; all the Soviet power can do is to combine the moderate politics of “state capitalism” with the intense cultural education of the inert peasant masses - NOT the “Communist propaganda” brain-washing, but simply a patient, gradual imposition of developed civilized standards. Facts and figures reveal “what a vast amount of urgent spadework we still have to do to reach the standard of an ordinary West European civilized country. /.../ We must bear in mind the semi-Asiatic ignorance from which we have not yet extricated ourselves.”³⁰ And could we not conceive of the Ukrainian protesters’ reference to “Europe” as the sign that their goal is also “to reach the standard of an ordinary West European civilized country”?

Here, however, things get quickly complicated: what, exactly, does “Europe” the Ukrainian protesters are referring to, stand for? It cannot be reduced to a single idea: it spans from nationalist, and even Fascist elements, up to the idea of what Etienne Balibar calls *égalité*, freedom-in-equality, the unique contribution of Europe to the global political imaginary, even if it is today more and more betrayed by European institutions and people themselves; plus, between these two poles, the naïve trust into European liberal-democratic capitalism. What Europe should see in Ukrainian protests is its best and its worst, and, to see this clearly, Europe has to look outside itself, onto a Ukrainian scene.

The Ukrainian nationalist Right is part of what is going on today from the Balkans to Scandinavia, from the US to Israel, from central Africa to India: a new Dark Age is looming, with ethnic and religious passions exploding, and the Enlightenment values receding. These passions were lurking in the dark all the time, but what is new now is the outright shamelessness of their display. In the middle of 2013, two public protests were announced in Croatia, a country in deep economic crisis, with high unemployment rate and a deep sense of despair among the population: trade unions tried to organize a rally in support of workers’ rights, while right wing nationalists started a protest movement against the use of Cyrillic letters on public buildings in cities with a Serb minority. The first initiative brought to a big square in Zagreb a couple of hundred people, the second one succeeded in mobilizing hundreds of thousands, the same as with a fundamentalist movement against gay marriages. And it is crucial to see this ethical regression as the obverse of the explosive development of global capitalism – they are the two

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30 Lenin 1966: 463.

sides of the same coin.

The expression *rückgängig machen*, suits perfectly this process. Imagine a society which fully integrated into its ethical substance the great modern axioms of freedom, equality, democratic rights, the duty of a society to provide for education and basic healthcare of all its members, and which rendered racism or sexism simply unacceptable and ridiculous – there is no need even to argue against, say, racism, since anyone who openly advocates racism is immediately perceived as a weird eccentric who cannot be taken seriously, etc. But then, step by step, although a society continues to pay lip service to these axioms, they are *de facto* deprived of their substance. Here is an example from the ongoing European history: in the summer of 2012, Viktor Orban, the Hungarian Rightist PM, said that in Central Europe a new economic system must be built

“and let us hope that God will help us and we will not have to invent a new type of political system instead of democracy that would need to be introduced for the sake of economic survival. /.../ Cooperation is a question of force, not of intention. Perhaps there are countries where things don’t work that way, for example in the Scandinavian countries, but such a half-Asiatic rag-tag people as we are can unite only if there is force.”³¹

The irony of these lines was not lost on some old Hungarian dissidents: when the Soviet army moved into Budapest to crush the 1956 anti-Communist uprising, the message repeatedly sent by the beleaguered Hungarian leaders to the West was: “We are defending Europe here.” (Against the Asiatic Communists, of course.) Now, after Communism collapsed, the Christian-conservative government paints, as its main enemy, Western multi-cultural consumerist liberal democracy for which today’s Western Europe stands, and calls for a new more organic communitarian order to replace the “turbulent” liberal democracy of the last two decades. Orban already expressed his sympathies with the “capitalism with Asian values,” so if the European pressure on Orban will continue, we can easily imagine him sending the message to the East: “We are defending Asia here!”

Today’s anti-immigrant populism stands for a clear passage

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31 Quoted from <http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/news-brief/2437991-orban-considers-alternative-democracy>.

from direct barbarism, to barbarism with a human face. It practices the regression from the Christian love of the Neighbor back to the pagan privileging of our tribe (Greeks, Romans...) versus the barbarian Other. Even if it is cloaked in a defense of Christian values, it is itself the greatest threat to Christian legacy. A century ago Gilbert Keith Chesterton clearly deployed the fundamental deadlock of the critics of religion: "Men who begin to fight the Church for the sake of freedom and humanity end by flinging away freedom and humanity if only they may fight the Church. /.../ The secularists have not wrecked divine things; but the secularists have wrecked secular things, if that is any comfort to them." Does the same not hold for the advocates of religion themselves? How many fanatical defenders of religion started with ferociously attacking the contemporary secular culture and ended up forsaking any meaningful religious experience? In a similar way, many liberal warriors are so eager to fight the anti-democratic fundamentalism that they will end by flinging away freedom and democracy themselves if only they may fight terror. If the "terrorists" are ready to wreck this world for love of another world, our warriors on terror are ready to wreck their own democratic world out of hatred for the Muslim other. Some of them love human dignity so much that they are ready to legalize torture – the ultimate degradation of human dignity - to defend it... And does the same not hold also for the recent rise of the defenders of Europe against the immigrant threat? In their zeal to protect Judeo-Christian legacy, the new zealots are ready to forsake the true heart of the Christian legacy. They, the anti-immigrant defenders of Europe, not the crowds of immigrants waiting to invade it, are the true threat to Europe.

One of the signs of this regression is the request of the new European Right for a more "balanced" view of the two "extremisms," the Rightist one and the Leftist one: we are repeatedly told that one should treat the extreme Left (Communism) the same way Europe after WWII was treating the extreme Right (the defeated Fascism and Nazism). Upon a closer look, this new "balance" is heavily unbalanced: the equation of Fascism and Communism secretly privileges Fascism, as can be seen from a series of arguments, the main among which is, that Fascism copied Communism which came first (before becoming a Fascist, Mussolini was a Socialist, and even Hitler was a National Socialist; concentration camps and genocidal violence were practiced in Soviet Union a decade before Nazis resorted to it; the annihilation of the Jews has a clear precedent in the annihilation of the class enemy; etc.). The point of this argumentation is that a moderate Fascism was

a justified response to the Communist threat (the point made long ago by Ernst Nolte in his defense of Heidegger's 1933 Nazi engagement). In Slovenia, the Right is arguing for the rehabilitation of the anti-Communist "Home Guard" which fought the partisans during the WWII: they made the difficult choice to collaborate with the Nazis in order to prevent the much greater absolute Evil of Communism. The same could be said for the Nazis (or Fascists, at least) themselves: they did what they did to prevent the absolute Evil of Communism...³²

So what are we to do in such a situation? Mainstream liberals are telling us that, when the basic democratic values are under threat by ethnic or religious fundamentalists, we should all unite behind the liberal-democratic agenda of cultural tolerance, save what can be saved, and put aside dreams of a more radical social transformation. There is, however, a fatal flaw in this call for solidarity: it ignores how liberal permissiveness and fundamentalism are caught in a vicious cycle of the two poles generating and presupposing each other. When we hear today a politician offering us a choice between liberal freedom and fundamentalist oppression, and triumphantly asking a (purely rhetorical) question "Do you want women to be excluded from public life and deprived of their elementary rights? Do you want every critic or mocking of religion to be punished by death?", what should make us suspicious is the very self-evidence of the answer – who would have wanted *that*? The problem is that liberal universalism long ago lost its innocence. What Max Horkheimer had said in 1930s should also be applied to today's fundamentalism: those who do not want to talk (critically) about liberal democracy and its noble principles should also keep quiet about religious fundamentalism.

So what about the fate of the liberal-democratic capitalist European dream in Ukraine? One cannot be sure what awaits Ukraine within the EU, beginning with austerity measures. In my books I repeatedly used the well-known joke from the last decade of the Soviet Union about Rabinovitch, a Jew who wants to emigrate? The bureaucrat at the emigration office asks him why, and Rabinovitch answers: "There are two reasons why. The first is that I'm afraid that in the Soviet Union the Communists will lose power, and the new power will put all the blame

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32 Along the same lines, some liberal critics of anti-Semitism claim that not only today anti-Semitism is predominantly Leftist, but that anti-Semitism was from the very beginning part of the Communist project. (Suffice it to note that the majority of the members of Lenin's Politburo in the first years of the Soviet power were of Jewish origins – a unique case in the Western world. Whatever Lenin was, he wasn't anti-Semitic.)

for the Communist crimes on us, Jews – there will again be anti-Jewish pogroms ...” “But”, interrupts him the bureaucrat, “this is pure nonsense, nothing can change in the Soviet Union, the power of the Communists will last forever!” “Well,” responds Rabinovitch calmly, “that’s my second reason.” We can easily imagine a similar exchange between a critical Ukrainian and a European Union financial administrator – the Ukrainian complains: “There are two reasons we are in a panic here in Ukraine. First, we are afraid that the EU will simply abandon us to the Russian pressure and let our economy collapse...” The EU administrator interrupts him: “But you can trust us, we will not abandon you, we will tightly control you and advise you what to do!” “Well,” responds the Ukrainian calmly, “that’s my second reason.”

So the question is not if Ukraine is worthy of Europe, good enough to enter EU, but if today’s Europe is worthy of the deepest aspirations of the Ukrainians. If Ukraine will end up as a mixture of ethnic fundamentalism and liberal capitalism, with oligarchs pulling the strings, it will be as European as Russia (or Hungary) is today. (And, incidentally, it would be crucial to also tell the full story of the conflict between different groups of oligarchs – the “pro-Russian” ones and the “pro-Western” ones – that forms the background of the big public events in Ukraine.) Political commentators claimed that EU did not support Ukraine enough in its conflict with Russia, that the EU response to the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea was half-hearted. But there is another kind of support which was even more missing: to offer Ukraine a feasible strategy of how to break out of its deadlock. To do this, Europe should first transform itself and renew its pledge to the emancipatory core of its legacy.

In his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, the great conservative T.S. Eliot remarked that there are moments when the only choice is the one between sectarianism and non-belief, when the only way to keep a religion alive is to perform a sectarian split from its main corpse. This is our only chance today: only by means of a “sectarian split” from the decaying corpse of the old Europe can we keep the European legacy of *égalité* alive. To put it bluntly, if the emerging New World Order is the non-negotiable destiny for all of us, then Europe is lost, so the only solution for Europe is to take the risk and break this spell of our destiny. Only in such a new Europe could Ukraine find its place. It is not the Ukrainians who should learn from Europe, Europe itself has to learn to incorporate the dream that motivated the Maidan protesters. Today, more than ever, fidelity to the emancipatory core of the European legacy

is needed. The lesson that the frightened liberals should learn is: only a more radicalized Left can save what is worth saving in the liberal legacy today.

How, then, are we to proceed? We don’t have to look far from Croatia. In February 2014, cities were burning in Bosnian Federation. It all began in Tuzla, the city with Muslim majority; the protests then spread to the capital Sarajevo, Zenica, but also Mostar (with large segment of Croat population) and Banja Luka (capital of the Serb part of Bosnia). Thousands of enraged protesters occupied, devastated and set fire to government buildings, inclusive of the Presidency of the Bosnian Federation. Although the situation calmed down the next day, the high tension remains in the air. The events immediately gave rise to conspiracy theories (the Serb government organized the protests to topple the Bosnian leadership), but one should safely ignore them, since it is clear that, whatever lurks “behind,” the protesters’ despair is authentic. One is tempted to paraphrase Mao Ze Dong’s famous phrase here: there is chaos in Bosnia, the situation is excellent! Why? The protesters’ demands were as simple as they can be: we want jobs, a chance of decent life, the end of corruption. But they mobilized people *in Bosnia*, a country which, in the last decades, came to symbolize ferocious ethnic cleansing leading to hundreds of thousands of dead. In one of the photos from the protests, we see the demonstrators waving three flags side by side: Bosnian, Serb, Croat – expressing the will to ignore ethnic differences as irrelevant. In short, we are dealing with the rebellion against nationalist elites: the people of Bosnia finally got it; who their true enemy is, not other ethnic groups but their own nationalist elites pretending to protect them from the others. It is as if the old and much abused Titoist motto of the “brotherhood and unity” of Yugoslav nations acquired new actuality.

One of the protesters’ targets was the European Union administration which oversees the Bosnian state, enforcing peace between the three nations and provides large financial help which enables the state to function. This may appear a surprise, since the goals of the protesters are nominally the same as the goals of the EU administration: prosperity, end of ethnic tensions and of corruption. However, while the EU administration pretends to act for overcoming ethnic hatreds and to promote multicultural tolerance, the way it effectively governs Bosnia entrenches partitions: the EU deals with nationalist elites as their privileged partners, mediating within them.

What the Bosnian outburst confirms is, thus, that one cannot

really overcome ethnic passions by way of imposing the liberal agenda: what brought the protesters together is a radical program of justice. The next and most difficult step would have been to organize the protests into a new social movement that ignores ethnic divisions and organize further protests – can one imagine a scene of enraged Bosnians and Serbs manifesting together in Sarajevo? Even if the protests will gradually lose their power, they will remain a brief spark of hope, something like the enemy soldiers fraternizing across the trenches in World War I. Authentic emancipatory events always involve such ignoring of particular identities as irrelevant. And the same holds for the recent visit of the two Pussy Riot members to New York: in a big gala show, they were introduced by Madonna in the presence of Bob Geldof, Richard Gere, etc. – the usual human rights gang. What they should have done there is to add just one word: to express their solidarity with Edward Snowden, to assert that Pussy Riot and Snowden are part of the same global movement. Without such gestures which bring together what, in our ordinary ideological experience, appears incompatible (Muslims, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia, Turkish secularists and anti-capitalist Muslims in Turkey, etc.), the protest movements will be always manipulated by one superpower in its struggle against the other.

And the same goes for Ukraine. Yes, the Maidan protesters were heroes, but the true fight begins now, the fight for what the new Ukraine will be, and this fight will be much tougher than the fight against Putin's intervention. A new and much more risky heroism will be needed here.³³ The model of this heroism is found in those Russians who courageously oppose the nationalist passion of their own country and denounce it as a tool of those in power. What is needed today is the “crazy” gesture of *rejecting the very terms of the conflict* and proclaiming the basic *solidarity* of Ukrainians and Russians. One should begin by organizing events of fraternization across the imposed divisions, establishing shared organizational networks between the authentic emancipatory core of Ukrainian political agents and the Russian opposition to Putin's regime.

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³³ Ylia Ponomarev, the only member of the Russian Duma who voted against the move to incorporate Ukraine's autonomous republic of Crimea into his country, made a valid point in explaining his vote: he emphasized that Russia has good arguments for its claim to Crimea, but he disagreed with the procedures used to take it back from Ukraine. Therein resides the core of the problem: it is not about arguments and justification of claims (at this level, all sides also cheat: the West which supported Kosovo secession from Serbia opposed the secession of Crimea; Russia which advocates referendum in Crimea rejects referendum in Chechnia, etc.). What makes the annexation of Crimea problematic is the way it was organized (under Russian military pressure, etc.), plus the larger geopolitical struggle behind it.

This may sound utopian, but it is only such “crazy” acts that can confer on the protests a true emancipatory dimension. Otherwise, we will get just the conflict of nationalist passions manipulated by oligarchs who lurk in the background. Such geopolitical games for the spheres of influence are of no interest whatsoever to the authentic emancipatory politics.

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What Does Theory Become? The Humanities, Politics, and Philosophy (1970–2010): Reflections and Propositions¹

Étienne Balibar

The questions to be discussed here coincide with some of my earliest interests, but I believe I can also ensure that they have an objective importance in a conjuncture that is critical for the forms of knowledge that are gathered together under the name of “the social sciences and the humanities,” and for the institutions that host them. Of course, this relationship is circular. However, in the title of the conference that brings us together each term—and especially their conjunction—presents a problem. This is why we can begin by considering the reasons adduced in the text that was circulating semi-officially within the university in preparation for this conference, and which, I understand, gave rise to a certain number of reactions—some of them quite lively.² To write the following is to say either too much or too little: “it was long believed that there exists a crisis in the social sciences and the humanities. After 1970, the Marxist or structuralist paradigms crumbled in the face of the reality of the concrete subject they did not manage to explain; and it was thought that other disciplines like economics or biology allowed for a better understanding of the human fact in its two dimensions of generality and singularity” Everything in this passage presents a problem: the singular of each term, the different uses of “or” (inclusive? exclusive?), the comparison of “paradigm” and “discipline,” which could suggest a strong but risky epistemological thesis: the disciplines between which we “distribute” what are sometimes called “the humanities,” sometimes the “social sciences,” are in fact nothing but explanatory, hermeneutical, or pragmatic “paradigms,” or else are entirely supported by such paradigms. So that when the latter falter,³

1 A paper presented at the Seminar of Humanities & Social Sciences, December 16–17, 2010, Université de Paris Ouest.

2 I later learned about the text published in *Liberation* on 16/12/2010 by a “collective of teachers and researchers of Nanterre” entitled “The Conference Taken at Its Word”, which in particular included the following formulations: “**Social sciences and humanities**. Despite the quality of the speakers, this category which long ago provoked so many controversies, and produced so much critical energy, consists here of an eclectic catalogue in which dominate two partisan positions that are presented as unavoidable, as natural as the air we breathe. On the one hand, the old story of “the crumbling of the structuralist and Marxist paradigm” (in the singular), ignoring their rich extensions and their theoretical renewal in the global intellectual space. On the other hand, by way of common ground, of a positivism with a new look, some of the speakers mentioned the “cognitive paradigm”: down with social critique, long live neuroscience and theories of behavior.”

3 They falter for intrinsic but also occasionally for extrinsic reasons: who could say, in this regard, what are the reasons behind the “crumbling” of the Marxist paradigm (if we can even speak of such a crumbling), of its own theoretical aporias or the attacks it has faced in institutions and in public opinion, and the relation these two have with historical events which involve them? Who can be sure that this evolution is linear or that the same hypotheses won’t reappear in another form, that there won’t be—or perhaps there already is—a “Neo-Marxism” just like there is a “Neo-Keynesianism”?

the discipline itself can be called into question. Witness the history of experimental psychology, sociology, and anthropology in the colonial and post-colonial periods. . . . But it is also possible that the finality of an authentically reflexive paradigm is precisely to question the legitimacy of established rules and programs of disciplinary research. This is what Marxism and psychoanalysis more or less successfully wanted to do, particularly in their “encounter” with the structuralist idea that marked the last half of the century (why is psychoanalysis now absent from this set up, while the debates over its subject are experiencing at this moment a new acuteness?).

In 1995, the year of my arrival at Nanterre, I participated in two daylong conferences of the URA 1394 organized by the CNRS⁴ on the topic of “Norms of Scientificity and the Object of the Social Sciences,” at which I presented a paper entitled “Structuralism: Method or Subversion of the Social Sciences?”⁵ In this paper I developed the following idea: although it seems to be “complete,” the trajectory of structuralism remains the bearer of questions that are important to the humanities, both for extending their field of knowledge and for resisting the liquidation by which they are threatened today *de jure* and *de facto*. To support this claim, I characterized structuralism not so much by its exportation of the linguistic model as by its attempts to solve dilemmas inherited from the epistemologies of the 19th century (reductionism vs. hermeneutics or nomology vs. ideography) by constituting “anthropological” domains as autonomous objectivities by means of an axiomatization of the “relations” on which social practice and its historical variations or transformations depend. On this basis, I then tried to show that structuralism—which is not a unified school of thought but a contradictory movement—is evenly divided around what, following Foucault, we could call “points of heresy.” I provisionally identified three such points: the first, concerning the constitution of the subject, opposes its representation as overdetermined individuality to its representation as lack or line of flight; the second, concerning the constitution of objectivity, opposes the idea of an “epistemological break” to that of a “view from afar”; the third, concerning the constitution of the universal, opposes cognitivism to comparativism,

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⁴ The URA (“Unité de Recherche Associée”) is a French research association funded by the CNRS “Centre national de la recherche scientifique”. (*Translator’s note.*)

⁵ This text is now available at <http://cirphes.ens.fr/ciepf/publications/etienne-balibar/>.

while leading to two “regulations” of the alterity of cultures. I concluded that structuralism, in a form that is equally distant from both empiricism and speculation (therefore “critique”), had ignored the opposition between philosophy and scientific disciplines (*doxa* and *theory*, according to Milner⁶). In the necessarily narrow limits of my intervention this year, I would like to try to displace and revive these hypotheses in order to take into account of a new conjuncture.

I will do so in two steps. First of all, I will return to the meaning and the function of the term “theory,” as it has been invested during at least a part of the structuralist adventure, in particular when it has been overdetermined through its relation to Marxism, and on the reasons why, even at the cost of profound revisions, I think could not be done completely without harm. Next, I would (quickly) like to examine two questions that today seem to me to be strategic for the capacity of the humanities to intervene in the social reality they take for an “object,” and thus for their eventual disciplinary renewal at the cost of a “theoretical” detour: one concerning the status of the economy as a social science, the other concerning the aporias of the idea of “multiculturalism,” for which the simple development of *cultural studies*, as currently defined, does not seem sufficient. Doubtlessly not by accident, we will see that the superimposition of these two questions implies a certain way to problematize the phenomena of violence that accompany the current developments of globalization and seem to require entering into a different regime of “power-knowledge” than the one under which the social sciences and humanities have worked in the institutional frameworks defined by the national, social, colonial, and secularized state.⁷

Let us begin with a few reflections on the meaning that a reference to “theory” takes on today in the disciplines with which we are concerned. Undoubtedly, we will not escape a differential, or even oppositional, formulation. But I believe it is insufficient to take up again the classical antitheses of theory and practice (or application) and of theoretical construction and inductive or descriptive empirical procedures, which do not have a specific relation to the history of the social sciences and humanities (even if we can make an effort to appropriate them there, which, in my view, precisely concerns

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⁶ Milner: 2008.

⁷ On these qualifications, see my recent book: Balibar: 2014.

“theory”).⁸ It seems to me that the discussion has to focus, first of all, on the singular status of *concepts* within the “human” and “social” disciplines. Yet these concepts still have, both internally and externally, a “polemical” status; and this is what also renders them eminently problematic from an epistemological point of view, by raising the suspicion that they are thereby inadequate for objectivity. Among the many terminologies that could be at our disposal here (for this character has been recognized by a great number of “theoreticians”), I propose to retain the one proposed by the English philosopher Walter Bryce Gallie in a famous but already dated article:

The concepts which I propose to examine relate to a number of organized or semi-organized human activities: in academic terms they belong to aesthetics, to political philosophy, to the philosophy of history and the philosophy of religion. My main thought with regard to them is this. We find groups of people disagreeing about the proper use of the concepts (...) When we examine the different uses of these terms and the characteristic arguments in which they figure we soon see that there is no one clearly definable general use of any of them which can be set up as the correct or standard use (...) Now once this variety of functions is disclosed it might well be expected that the disputes in which the above mentioned concepts figure would at once come to an end. But in fact this does not happen (...) each party continues to defend its case with what it claims to be convincing arguments, evidence and other forms of justification.⁹

It is worth noting that the mode of discursivity thus described does not characterise such and such a discipline by providing a means to enclose it but on the contrary defines a transdisciplinarity, what one could call a “porosity” of disciplinary borders, which opens up the social sciences and humanities not only on the side of political theory and history but also on the side of philosophy. On the other hand, we should note that it is not only a question of a characteristic of disciplines or paradigms (as, for example, we can say that, in Kuhn’s perspective, every “paradigm” is sooner or later destined to be “contested”) but also a modality that is characteristic of conceptuality itself. Gallie’s

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⁸ In my 1995 presentation I cited Passeron: 2013, and Wallerstein: 2001. I could cite the “critical” turn initiated by James Clifford and George Marcus in *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, starting with the idea that anthropological research is always a labor of writing whose codes are inscribed within an determinate institutional place.

⁹ Gallie 1955-6: 167-198. See the commentary by Capdevila 2004: 293.

suggestion, then, is that this conflictuality—far from representing a sign of failure for theory and ultimately for knowledge—designates a mode of constitution proper to certain disciplines, or to certain objects, but under a twofold condition: 1) that the contestation does not remain assigned to the partisan, and mutually antagonistic, *uses* of a *pre-existing* theory, but rather that it is truly constitutive of an “antithetics” of reason,” or returns from use to definition;¹⁰ 2) that the contestation includes a *reflexive* dimension, namely, that it leads to the determination of the “standpoint” (the socio-historical situation but also the practical objective of transformation or intervention) being inscribed in the field of knowledge itself, as one of the conditions of possibility for its own “judgments.”

These considerations seem correct to me, but they are still a little too abstract regarding everything the discussions of recent decades. To go a step further, I now propose uses of the term “theory” in relation to two alternatives: on the one hand, that of *science* and *critique*; on the other, that of *object* and *problem*. Moreover, it seems to me that the first inevitably leads to the second. What we call “theory” (sometimes theoreticism) never ceases to oscillate between an ideal of scientificity and an ideal of critical function, whereby the first seems to be privileged by structuralism, while the second is always attributed to Marxism as being an inherent trait within the coupling we propose to discuss here, and of which it should be rightly acknowledged that it belongs to a rather fleeting conjuncture, in a singular place, which must appear provincial to us today (even if it cannot be reduced to “Nanterre madness,” where this conjunction was also not very popular in its own time). But the fact that theory thus occupies an unstable or even untenable position, correctly attests to the paradoxical relations of interdependence between these terms. What is at bottom repeatedly suggested is that scientificity can only advance by means of critique, and, conversely, critique can only advance by means of science or at least conceptualization.¹¹ This unity of opposites is analogous to what can be observed in the field of the

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¹⁰ Gallie refers to the Kantian “antinomies” as if a philosophical procedure for solving conceptual conflicts, but it could be thought that their first characteristic is to turn them into a condition of thought (incompatible with the empirical constitution of the natural sciences and by the same token excluding anthropology from the field of scientificity.)

¹¹ From memory, I reproduce a formula used by the philosopher Gorges Canguilhem in his lectures: the notion of “scientificity” is equivocal, since it covers both the model of a formal deduction and an experimental verification-rectification, but the fact is that formalization most often advances through experimentation and experimentation through mathematization.

physical sciences between the mathematical and the experimental, but at the same time it displaces it. It implies that scientificity is established with the objective of underscoring, in a reflexive way, the ideological conditions of its own questions and consequently the historicity of its “subjects.” In this sense, one can take up again the thesis that “all science is the science of ideology”: not the science of the ideology of *others*, but of its *own* ideology.¹² Conversely, critique presupposes not so much a semantics or hermeneutics of subjectivity (as a philosophy of alienation always tends more or less to propose) as a pragmatics or a capacity to intervene in order to bring about the *transformation* of given social situations—particularly conflictual situations—experienced as intolerable by some of their “subjects.” Critique therefore takes on the form of what Foucault calls *parrhèsia*, or “speaking (the) truth” in the face of power or domination, but it can only do so effectively only according to a cognitive modality, by producing an effect not only of mutual “recognition” but also a knowledge, and therefore a detachment regarding experience, identifying tendencies or describable and verifiable relations, revealing determinations equally ignored by the dominant and the dominated. In this respect, in 1995 I tried to compare the theme of the “view from afar” with that of the “epistemological break.”

Thus we are led to reverse the initial situation: the question is not so much to know if “theory” is taken as an explanatory model, a construction of an object of knowledge, or a manifestation of the demand for emancipation and the transformative forces included in a given situation; it is rather about understanding how the “essentially contested” (and therefore contestable) nature of concepts attests to the *position* of theory within the domain with which we are concerned: at the intersection of a critical engagement and a project of scientific knowledge. It is also the condition that includes a dimension that is not accidentally but *intrinsically* self-critical. This can be explained by the fact that in the field of the social sciences and the humanities the idea of a “normal science” in a Kuhnian sense means even less than it does in the field of natural sciences.¹³ We can then directly move on to

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¹² Although initially advanced by Macherey in a 1965 article, it was reprised by Althusser in the introductory essay to *Lire le Capital*

¹³ I once proposed the idea that a “science”, which proceeds essentially by means of the rectification of its presuppositions, following the Bachelardian model, is irreducible to the model proposed by Thomas Kuhn regarding of the succession between the phases of normalization of paradigms and the phases of revolution that put these into question: see Balibar: 1979.

the second opposition under consideration: *the science of objects or the science of problems*. It must be acknowledged here that structuralism, as Milner has explained so well, in a sense represented the triumph of the classical ideal of a “science of objects,” which runs from Aristotle to Kant and Husserl (but also to Bachelard and Lévi-Strauss), constructing the autonomy—indeed, the semantic closure—of its domain by defining a system of laws or axiomatizable relations that we could call *mathèsis*.¹⁴ But from the beginning, there was at work in structuralism a completely new orientation through Marx, Freud, and finally Foucault: what Lacan calls “conjectural science,” Deleuze relates to an intrinsic relation of critique and clinic, and Althusser also tried to introduce into his “theoreticist” conception of Marxism (centered on the correlation between the system of relations and the interplay of tendencies and counter-tendencies), establishing as the criterion of historicity the “concrete analysis of situations” or the subjection of the activities of knowledge to the essentially unpredictable conditions of conjuncture. Let us note that science does not aim here to constitute objects or domains of objectivity but rather to identify *problems* (in the sense of what “presents a problem” for the actors in a certain situation, the subjects of an institution, etc., and thus prohibits them from “remaining in place,” whether a place within discourse or within an institution). A theory that tries at the same time to uphold the two requirements of scientificity and critical engagement cannot be only the science of an *object*, or of a *domain of objectivity* unfolding between the formal generality of causal laws and the singularity of “cases” or figures of individuality, but must also become a practice of *problematization*, which occurs only on the basis of differentials of visibility and invisibility, subjection and revolt, the normalization and subjectivation inscribed within situations and relations of forces. Here pragmatics necessarily carries theory onto semantics, for situations can neither be defined *a priori*, nor simply described, but rather exhibit a characteristic of eventness, urgency, and involvement (what Foucault brought together in the notion of *actuality*). Problematization is the diagnostics of a situation’s urgency. But this presupposes that it arises by means of historical inquiry, or by the interpretation of discourses and lifting their repression in “conditions” that are not as such spontaneously known (and in particular not as

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¹⁴ Milner: 1978. Also see Desanti: 1975.

“parts” existing in their institutional arrangement).¹⁵ To problematize is not only to “take a position,” it is to transform the arrangement of positions, the tracing of lines of demarcation, or the “distribution of the sensible,” as Rancière says.

We are not going to amalgamate all discourses existing within the field of humanities onto the relations of scientificity and critique (we could even think that every *invention* or definition of a field of research or of a disciplinary paradigm corresponds precisely to a singular way of articulating them). But we will guard against superficial antitheses. For example, in his recent work *De la critique*,¹⁶ which indicates current reflection on the status of the human sciences, Luc Boltanski characterizes the orientations of a critical theory as a strategic “provocation” intended to interrupt the continuity of social practice, by realizing both an “unveiling” of its own conditions and an “exploitation” of the contradictions inherent in it, symptomatically exhibited by the antithesis of discourses and actors. In this case I don’t see, for my part, an absolute incompatibility with the way in which in a 1976 text dedicated to seeking analogies between the status of Marxism and that of psychoanalysis (but basically generalizable to a broader spectrum of discourse) Althusser proposed a concept of “conflictual science,” always already marked by splits not only in its developments but also in the relationship itself of its bearers to its objects, which *par excellence* constitutes *its problem*.¹⁷ In both cases, it is a question of escaping traditional epistemological dilemmas that oppose “factual judgments” to “value judgments,” by establishing on the basis of “concrete situations” an intrinsic dialectic of knowledge and politics, for which each of these terms is always already present inside the other, but according to changing and transformable modalities.

In the second part of my presentation I will move on to examine, as I have already announced, two strategic situations, always in a programmatic way. The first concerns the significance of current debates regarding the use and conception of “economic theory”

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15 Cf. Foucault 1997:117. It is significant that the example on which Foucault relies here is that of the interaction between psychiatry and criminology, which could be extended to the general question of the status of “anthropological differences” in modern society. See also the entire discussion on the functions of prison developed beginning with *Surveiller et punir* and the activities of the Groupe Information Prison.

16 Boltanski 2004: 151.

17 Althusser 1991: 17-30.

(debates that apply in particular to the organization of its teaching). This controversy, in France as well as in the United States, began by questioning the (political, epistemological) “neutrality” of the criteria of formalization, below which the title of “science” is no longer recognized by the “profession.” Following the outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis, it continues by questioning the adequacy of the “dominant” economic models to reality (whose counterpart is the suspicion that intrinsically “unreal” models carry out an essentially ideological function).¹⁸ By adapting a critical model proposed long ago by J.T. Desanti, that of “three kinds of problems” likely to arise in the history of a science (as is nowadays with mathematics),¹⁹ we could suggest that the conceptual conflictualities in question are here three distinctive and superimposed orders, in such a way that each superior level retains over the previous one that which seemed at first to be independent (what one could call a *polemical ascent*, just as Quine spoke of “semantic ascent”).²⁰

At the first level, there is a questioning of “dominant” paradigms and the reactivation of the divisions between “parties” or “disciplinary orientations” that are directly attached to programs or the taking of positions in matters of economic politics (which quite simply amounts to noting that the economy rediscovers its former name of “political economy” and not only “economics”). This controversy begins with a confrontation between “Neo-classicists” and “Neo-Keynesians” regarding the capacity for self-regulation by financial markets. It continues with a confrontation over the question of knowing if the functioning of these inherently speculative markets arises from the same logic of adjustment between supply and demand and the periodic return to equilibrium between these two, which allows for the modelling of the distribution of goods or the allocation of productive capitals. Finally, it concerns the univocity or the equivocity of what we mean by “market”.²¹

On the second level, there arises another “essential contestation” regarding the notions of *equilibrium*, the *rationality of “agents,”* and consequently the mechanisms of regulation. This contestation leads certain economists to revive questions posed by Keynes regarding the

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18 See the “Manifeste d’économistes atterrés” publié le 01/09/2010 par Philippe Ashkénazy, Thomas Coutrot, André Orléan et Henri Sterdyniak ; and the articles of Krugman : 2009, and et James: 2010.

19 Desanti: 1975.

20 See Laugier-Rabate: 1992.

21 Cf. Aglietta: 2010; Giraud: 2001.

status of uncertainty in matters of economic development or cycles: relative or absolute, accidental or intrinsic, endogenous or exogenous. To conclude, this contestation concerns the fundamental postulate of utilitarianism: that of a direct or indirect *convergence* of economic activities towards a common good or an optimal allocation of economic factors (barring institutional or socio-political *obstacles*). But at the same time, this contestation is confronted with the destabilizing perspective of an intrinsic “divergence” of the financial economy, which could at best be temporarily limited by state controls.²²

Now arises the “third kind” of problem (which Desanti related to the necessity of “breaking up the apparent stability of stationary semantic kernels” on which the very definition of a domain depends): nothing is simple here, for, on the one hand, we see formulated the requirement of reintegrating the economy in its own right into the field of the “social sciences” (a requirement that we could call democratic, since it suggests that the economy can no longer appear within humanities as if it were a “sovereign” discipline, whether it were situated *below* the “social” in a domain of material conditions that are prior to political conflicts, or it were *beyond*, in a purely formal space, having to do in general with logics of action and their mathematical foreseeability). But, on the other hand, we also see a tendency from the perspective of ecology (since ecology is simultaneously present in other domains, particularly anthropology) to call into question the idea of an autonomy of the “social” or the “human” in relation to “nature.” This is the question of *externalities* whose bypassing or neutralization precisely enabled the construction of models of evolution that were *a priori* oriented toward equilibrium or regulation. Yet these externalities are of several types, which we don’t know if they are separable how they can interfere: either *social* (for example, the effect on crises played by inequalities in the standard of living and by exclusions and their aggravation),²³ or *environmental* (themselves to be seen in what is perhaps the biggest paradigm shift underway in the “humanities”: the re-questioning of the nature/culture opposition,²⁴ or even—more restrictive, in my view—the revision of the very idea of *historicity*, which requires the integration into “geological time” of a feedback effect of

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22 Skidelsky: 2009.

23 Giraud: 1996.

24Descola Philippe: 2013.

human activity).²⁵ As a result, the relationship between the history of social and cultural evolutions and the transformations of planetary ecosystems simultaneously appears to be ever more uncertain and ever more restrictive: whence, too, arises its immediately conflictual character, not as a “critical phase” of scientific knowledge but as a permanent condition of its activity without a predictable end. These revolutions underway in the conception of historicity are fully *theoretical*, illustrating the cross-checking of science and critique: they are situated at the very point where epistemological problems are encountered in relation to the internality or externality of socio-political regulations and the predictability or unpredictability of tendencies leading to the transformation of contemporary societies (which obviously also have a “cultural” dimension).

We are tempted to confront these hypotheses with those that could be drawn from a second example about which I shall, for lack of space, be brief. The idea that “multiculturalism has failed” has recently been brought into the forefront in the form of a declaration of German Chancellor Angela Merkel—a declaration behind which lurks the suspicion of political manipulation.²⁶ But behind this apparent “problem of opinion,” is revealed very quickly a fundamental scientific and critical (therefore a theoretical) stake concerning the very notion of culture: its “comprehension” and its “extension.” Just as there have always been several competing concepts of “culture” (which one tended to attribute to traditions themselves that were “culturally different,” which in most cases meant “national,” while—according to a thesis of Lenin that was famous in its time—every culture is intrinsically divided along lines of cleavage that are orthogonal to national differences),²⁷ so too from the start there have been several concepts of “multiculturalism.” It is only by homonymy that we can bring together under the same concept a “multiculturalism” like Charles Taylor’s or Will Kymlicka’s, for whom cultures are totalities external to one another, properties of historical communities to which one belongs by tradition (occasionally by assimilation), and whose co-existence can be promoted by means of a constitutional pluralism, in such a way that for each individual “his or her” communitarian belonging remains in the last instance the

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25 Chakrabarty: 2009.

26 See the reaction by Habermas: 2010.

27 Lenine 1959: 11-45.

vehicle of education and subjectivation; and a “multiculturalism” like Homi Bhabha’s and Stuart Hall’s, whose ultimate historical horizon is an incessant process of interaction between communities, leading to the idea that what makes subjects capable of individualization and historical transformation is their capacity for *translation* and, therefore, of disidentification.²⁸ We also know that over time postcolonial modern nations have been very unequally receptive to either of these conceptions of multiculturalism.

At any rate, the contemporary phenomenon described as the “return of the religious” or of “the sacred” irreversibly upends the debate and determines a crisis of the idea of multiculturalism as a realization of the cosmopolitan ideal.²⁹ Here we touch on a true repressed of the humanities (including in the form of a division into separate disciplines and methodologies, opposing anthropology to the history of religion or to hermeneutics): the incompatibility of the *objects* is precisely the symptom of the *problem*, but it does not yet prescribe the ways of the *problematization*. Perhaps the latter proceeds by means of a “critical” recognition of the element of truth contained in the idea—however tendentious—of the *Clash of Civilizations*, set forth by Samuel Huntington at the moment of the redeployment of the American empire to the Middle East, and since then repeated under different names in the service of disturbing resurgences of nationalism covered by the equivocal notion of “populism.” But above all it is the lesson of *extended comparativism*, which re-questions the protocols of “axiological neutrality,” founded on the postulate of a secularization that would be irreversibly tied to modernization. Within the *double bind* of contemporary conflicts (and their political instrumentalization), “culture” and “religion” are almost never separable (especially not in the form of a “culture of reference” that would underlie the Western institution of *laïcité*). But nor can they be identified using familiar terminology, if it is true that, on the one hand, we are dealing with processes of socialization within which, even in a conflictual manner,

28 Taylor: 1994; Kymlicka: 2000; Bhabha: 2004; Hall: 2008. Pour un tableau comparatif : Fistetti: 2009.

29 Danièle Hervieu-Leger dates from the 70s the diffusion of the expression “return of the religious” (*La Religion pour mémoire*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1993). The terminology of the “return of the sacred” is used particularly by Ashis Nandy (see “The Return of the Sacred. The Language of Religion and the Fear of Democracy in a Post-Secular World”, *Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture* 2007) (<http://www.soscbaha.org/downloads/Return-of-the-Sacred.pdf>).

hybridization or “creolization” is the rule, forming the very condition of the invention and transformation of forms of life, while, on the other hand, emerge true *points of untranslatability*, which refer back to the irreducible heterogeneity of the symbolic representations of the human (or “anthropological differences”: the role of sex differences, the communication value of bodies, the meaning of life or survival, of illness and death, the hierarchical classification of crimes. . .).

We clearly see today that the projects of the “multicultural constitution” for democratic societies *considerably underestimated* the violence of religious conflicts (or at least religious at root) and above all misrecognizes their nature. In fact, these conflicts are not opposed *particularisms* (in which case the “solution” would consist either in their separation under the aegis of a superior, transcendent universality, or of their integration into a syncretic “spirituality”) but *are incompatible universalisms*. However, this in no way implies that the question can be subsumed under the alternative of either a generalized “war of religions” to be relegated to “private” space by means of the reiteration of the “sovereign moment” of the institution of national public power or else an “ecumenism” or “interreligious dialogue” into which would enter only the voices of those who define themselves as a “community of believers,” subsuming the political determination under their narcissistic self-definition. The truly political level (which in another context can be called the challenge of citizenship) appears wherever social determinations—which are strictly speaking *neither cultural nor religious*—overdetermine every articulation of the different mechanisms of collective identification. Contrary to the dominant media representation, no “religious conflict” in the world today has “causes” that are essentially religious themselves. This is why the “Marxist” category of *ideology*, insofar as it implies, at a minimum, the structural combination of several scenes—each of which is an “absent cause” for the other—can appear anew as an indispensable heuristic framework. Here we are (just as with respect to “externalities” in economy) on the threshold of problems of the third kind, transgressing disciplinary borders, whereas the search for categories with which to think cultural diversity pertains to the first kind, and the incompatibility of “codes” of cultural comparativism and religious comparativism pertains instead to the second.³⁰

30 Here I am sketching propositions developed in my article “Cosmopolitisme et sécularisme”, an adaptation of the *Anis Makdisi Memorial Lecture* (American University of Beirut, 2009).

At any rate, my objective here was not to “resolve” any problem whatsoever but only to show that a determinate “conjuncture” (the one we vaguely identify by the name of globalization or the *second globalization*: the first having been determined by European expansion and the second by the “provincialization” of Europe) gives rise to the resurgence of conflicts of a new type that in the end probably imply deep questioning of the current status of “disciplinary” forms of knowledge”: not only from the standpoint of their explanatory paradigm but from the standpoint of their “cosmopolitan function,” which is partly responsible for their academic division.³¹ Let us not forget that this revision has at stake the possibility of thinking about the various forms of violence in the contemporary world, if not of actually reducing their uncertainty.³² Such revision needs all at once economists, *political theorists*, and anthropologists of a new type (and therefore formed differently).

Translated by:

Tijana Okić & Selma Asotić & Ted Stolze

31 I am thus not in disagreement, at least in principle, with Wallerstein's thesis: the very definition of the “human sciences” is a function of a certain kind of “world economy” and of the politics that dominates it: this thesis does not lead to any relativism or scepticism but to a new articulation of critical and scientific elements within theory. See Wallerstein: 2006.

32 Balibar: 2010.

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Contemporary Thought and the Crisis of Negation

Jelica Šumič

ABSTRACT

The problem of the way out, traditionally conceived in negative terms: as an 'opposition to', 'critique of', 'rebellion against' or, simply, as a 'negation of', is all the more acute in the present conjecture, whether one calls it the state of exception, capitalist-parliamentarism, post-democracy or the discourse of the capitalist, as the new regime of mastery, knowing no limit, no outside and therefore no exception, seems to annihilate the possibility of a way out that would articulate the negation of the present with the creation of an alternative to that which exists. If contemporary thought faces today the growing impasses of the way out, this is partly, at least, due, according to Badiou, to the crisis of negation. Insofar as there is no question more burning today than the question of the way out, i.e. the possibility of a radical break with the existing state of affairs capable of initiating change within the late capitalist conjecture, or, in Badiou's words, capable of transforming the transcendental of the present world, our task can be none other than to examine to what extent contemporary thought, associating psychoanalysis and philosophy, can rise to this challenge.

Keywords:

philosophy, psychoanalysis, Badiou, Lacan, negation, resistance, emancipation

Insofar as there is no question more burning today than the question of the way out, i.e. the possibility of a radical break with the existing state of affairs, capable of initiating change within the late capitalist conjecture, or, in Badiou's words, capable of transforming the transcendental of the present world, our task can be none other than to examine to what extent contemporary thought, associating psychoanalysis and philosophy, can rise to this challenge. If contemporary thought faces today the growing impasses of the way out, this is partly, at least due, according to Badiou, to the crisis of negation.¹ The problem of the way out, traditionally conceived in negative terms: as an 'opposition to', 'critique of', 'rebellion against' or, simply, as a 'negation of', is all the more acute in the present conjecture, whether one calls it the state of exception, capitalist-parliamentarism, post-democracy or the discourse of the capitalist, as

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¹ Badiou, 2014, pp. 45-55.

the new regime of mastery, knowing no limit, no outside and therefore no exception, seems to annihilate the very nexus of negation and creation, i.e. the possibility of a way out that would articulate the negation of the present with the creation of an alternative to that which exists.

As a consequence, contemporary responses to a perceived crisis of negation as a condition for a new beginning, a creation of some novelty, center around attempts to conceptualise differently the locations in which we might uncover a reserve of transformative potential of thought. Renouncing the temptation of looking for an alternative to capitalism in an exterior, in something which capitalism cannot appropriate, contemporary thinkers conceptualise potential for change at the heart of capital's power. In what follows, I intend to critically engage with this quest for such a potential from a slightly different perspective. My point of departure is a shift that has been taking place in contemporary thought over the past three decades, namely, a drift away from an understanding of the break with the existing state of affairs in terms of a dialectical relationship between destruction and construction, towards an account of the way out from the here and now, in terms of resistance, the latter being conceived in non-dialectical terms. This move, from a dialectical to a non-dialectical account of the way out, while marking 'a sort of crisis of trust in the power of negativity,'² to borrow Badiou's term, signals at the same time a radical transformation of the relationship between thought and the rebellion of the body.

An intriguing account of this shift, which appears to be itself a direct consequence of the weakening, if not the ruin, of the category of negativity, especially in the realm of politics, can be found in Jean-Claude Milner's book, *Constats*. According to Milner, revolutionary politics maintains its pre-eminence so long as it is grounded in the conjunction of thought and rebellion. What is meant by politics is nothing less than the capacity of thought to produce material effects in the social field, the privileged figure of these effects being the insurrection of the social body.³ Seen from this perspective, the defeat, or retreat, of emancipatory politics (in this reading, identified with politics *tout court*), that we have been witnessing for the past three decades, signals the incapacity of contemporary thought to translate its

2 Badiou, 2014, p. 46.

3 Milner, 2002, p. 24..

effects into rebellion.

It should be noted, however, that this postulation of the thought-rebellion link suggests no 'natural' affinity between the two. On the contrary, if the emergence of the conjunction of thought and rebellion marks the break of modernity in the domain of politics, as Milner claims, this is only due to the fact that modern political thought, in opposition to the classical thought, which precludes the very idea of linking these two heterogeneous terms, is centred around their 'unnatural' union. Indeed, for classical political philosophy, grounded in the assumption of the unbridgeable gap between thought and the body, rebellion, situated in the somatic moment rather than in thought, represents the impossible-real of politics, and, thus, remains inconceivable.⁴ The linking of thought and rebellion, that is, of two, ultimately incompatible entities, inasmuch as the latter is designated as the negation of the former, would, then, mark the invention of a new politics. Setting out from the assumption that there is no intrinsic bond between the body and thought, nor a common ground upon which they could initially meet, modernity is assigned the task of providing a base for their conjunction. As Milner rightly observes, in the modern universe of science (this being a universe without beyond, a universe that knows of no limit and no measure), thought and rebellion cannot meet. Hence, to make their union possible, the 'ethics of the maximum',⁵ as Milner calls it, must intervene. This is because only 'extremist' ethics, one that drives the subject beyond the possible into the impossible, that requires a finite, mortal, speaking being to act as if he were immortal,⁶ can establish a link between thought and the body, thus, providing a proper grounding for a politics that would constitute a proper way out in the infinite universe. Seen in this perspective, the way out, conceived as a politics of emancipation, appears to be less a matter of redemption, of repairing a wrong done to victims, as an experience of exploring the unheard-of, indeed 'impossible', possibilities of a given situation.

We can understand, now, why the emancipationist paradigm, so construed, is condemned to collapse once the alliance of thought and rebellion starts to falter, and the process of their dissociation sets in. What is striking about Milner's account is the judiciousness with which

4 Milner, p. 34..

5 Milner, p. 26..

6 Milner, p. 27..

the negative implications of the process of disjunction, of the drifting apart of thought and rebellion that we are witness to today, are brought to the fore: thought ceases to be politically subversive; worse, thought is worth its name only by being conservative, hostile to all forms of rebellion, while rebellion, on the other hand, is true to its nature only by expressing itself through a thoughtless, headless brutality.⁷ Put another way, thought marks the dissociation from rebellion by its growing powerlessness to produce material effects in the political and the social field, whereas rebellion records its break with thought by turning into a resistance against thought, in short, by being the unthought. The present antinomic, non-dialectical relationship between thought and rebellion can thus be accounted for in terms of a forced choice between 'I am (not)' and 'I am (not) thinking'. Confronted with the disjunction, according to which I am, the corporeal presence, there where I am not thinking and vice versa, rebellion assuredly opts for the 'I am' and therefore for the 'I am not thinking', suggesting that what is lost in this forced choice in any case is precisely a resistant thought, a thought capable of inciting rebellion. This is evident in contemporary theorising about resistance, insofar as that which is, strictly speaking, a problem (namely, the antinomy between thought and resistance), is proposed as a solution.

This is of particular importance for, as we will argue in what follows, the fact that the choice of resistance appears to be a true forced choice, certainly unavoidable for a thought that seeks to indicate its separation, both from the solution put forward by the traditional theories of emancipation, as well as from the present-day ideology celebrating the worldwide victory of the alliance of capitalism and representative democracy, signals that contemporary theorising about the way out has reached an impasse. Hence, it is hardly surprising that contemporary theorists of resistance, while insisting on its necessity, readily admit that resistance in the present conjecture of globalisation may well be perfectly useless. Consider the following statement: 'I say resistance without any delusion about the consequences of that resistance'.⁸ Crudely put, resistance today may well appear to be nothing but an invention of the system itself, a response orchestrated by it, in short, part of its defensive strategy. The reason for this is the mutation of the

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⁷ Milner, p. 51..

⁸ Lyotard and Larochele, 1992, p. 417.

present regime of mastery, which, having as its structural principle the generalisation of exception, succeeds in creating through this very lawlessness an interminable status quo, immune to all change. For, what is paradoxical about the regime founded on the generalised exception and suspension of the law, a world in which the law is made to coincide entirely with the lawlessness, is that the regime, instead of breaking down, keeps running. The eternisation of the existing state of affairs provides us with a plausible key to identifying the difficulties of contemporary theory of resistance in finding a way out of the present impasse.

To understand how the present mutation of the dominant power structure bears upon our sense of the possibility of its negation, and its transformation; and how this, in turn, has come to permeate the very activity of thought itself, it may be helpful to turn to Lacan. His succinct remark gives us a penetrating insight into the problem: 'In relating this misery [caused by capitalism] to the discourse of the capitalist, I denounce the latter. Only here, I point out in all seriousness that I cannot do this, because in denouncing it, I reinforce it—by normalising it, that is, improving it'.⁹ This cryptic remark seems to convey Lacan's principled pessimism with regard to the possible exit from capitalism, the contemporary regime of mastery. For, what we have here is the reversal of the usual 'progressivist' interpretation of Marx's dictum: 'the limit of capital is capital itself,' according to which, due to the inexorable laws of the development of productive forces, capitalism will come up against a limit it cannot overcome and therefore face its own ruin. The lesson to be drawn from Lacan's remark is quite different: instead of an announcement of the inevitable end of capitalism, it brutally states that any attempt at stopping the working of capitalism, far from surpassing it, consolidates it. Thus, if capitalism refuses to collapse, to come up against the limit of its own growth and expansion, this is due to what Lacan calls its structural 'greediness'¹⁰, as capitalism itself is nothing but the impasse of growth. This also explains why this structural deadlock, this growing impasse of capitalism, is a stimulus, rather than an impediment to its further development. What then, would a way out of capitalist domination be if all solution seems to become entangled in the growing impasses of the capitalist's drive for growth?

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⁹ Lacan, 1990, pp. 13-14.

¹⁰ Lacan, 1990, p. 28.

To be sure, Foucault's, Lyotard's, Derrida's, Deleuze's, Nancy's, and Agamben's work stems from a certain sense of negation and its creative, i.e. emancipatory potential, yet without laying claim to a world transforming perspective initiated through politics. The solution put forward by these theorists who appear to be taking distance from a political solution, yet who refuse to despair because the revolutionary politics traditionally considered as the way out is finished with, consists in emphatically asserting the continuation of resistance by other means, and on other terrains.

One might ask, though, what motivates this belief in the ineradicability of resistance, especially as the assumption by many contemporary theorists of resistance is, that there is no privileged site from which to launch resistance. Once resistance is no longer linked to some already-existing, and identifiable node, such as the proletariat, its emergence can, in principle, be accounted for in two different ways. According to the first account, the possibility of resistance resides in the fact that the social field, which is itself only to the extent that it is traversed by various and even conflicting forces, appears to be non-totalisable, a not-all. This would imply that a space for resistance is opened up by the very incommensurability of these forces which turn the socio-political space into a site of endless struggle. In the second interpretation, however, advanced primarily by Lyotard and Deleuze, resistance testifies to the fact that a given system or regime of domination incorporates some 'intractable' heterogeneity,¹¹ which has the power to jam its functioning. Several terms have been proposed to designate this resistant particularity: Lyotard calls it 'the intractable,' Lacan theorises it under *objet petit a*, and Foucault's word for it is 'the pleb'. All these concepts come to characterise this, with respect to the system, immanent node of resistance in terms of some elusive, unfathomable, ungraspable entity, pregnant with paradoxical oppositions: it has no substance, no figure and therefore no 'proper' embodiment, yet there is a proliferation of disguises under which it manifests its presence; it represents a hard, inert kernel that resists the system, yet it seems to dissolve into nothingness as soon as we try to pin it to some positive entity.

Generally speaking, we can consider these various, often mutually exclusive, attempts of conceiving an effective resistance that would be attuned to the deadlocks of our situation a symptom of the breakdown

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¹¹ Lyotard, 1993, pp. 168-169.

of the classical, i.e. dialectical notion of negation. Indeed, with the emergence of a new regime of mastery that knows no limit, no outside, negation no longer constitutes a true principle of creation. Rather, taken in its purely destructive aspect, negation, instead of constituting a *conditio sine qua non* for the emergence of some epoch breaking novelty, remains capable of doing away with the old, yet proves to be powerless in giving rise to a new creation. As a result, the question of the relationship between negation and creation must be re-posed in such a way that the emphasis is less on the destructive aspect of negation than on its capacity of creating, within the existing regime of mastery and at a distance from it, a space of independence and autonomy for the subject's decisions and actions.

An idea of the emancipatory potential of such a 'subtractive' negation, to take up Badiou's term, can be found in Lacan's staging of a non-dialectical relationship between psychoanalysis or, more precisely, the discourse of the analyst, and the existing regime of mastery and domination, the discourse of the capitalist. Instead of a critique which is, by structural necessity, caught in the vicious circle of the drive for growth, Lacan proposes the following solution: 'The more saints, the more laughter; that's my principle, to wit, the way out of capitalist discourse—which will not constitute progress, if it happens only for some.'¹²

How is the position of the saint to be understood in terms of negation? As evidence that all critique, all opposition, all resistance is, ultimately, illusory, useless? Rejecting critique and negation as being outdated today, Lacan rejects at the same time a widespread practice of self-accusation en vogue among contemporary philosophers burdening philosophy with crimes it had not committed (from Auschwitz to Goulag). In response to those who would be taking 'all the burdens of the world's misery on to their shoulders', Lacan states emphatically: 'One thing is certain: to take the misery on to one's shoulders ... is to enter into a discourse that determines it, even if only in protest'. What Lacan proposes instead is the following advice: those who are 'busying themselves at [the] supposed burdening, oughtn't to be protesting, but collaborating. Whether they know it or not, that's what they're doing'¹³.

Does it mean that Lacan preaches the 'heroism' of renunciation

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¹² Lacan, 1990, p. 16.

¹³ Lacan, 1990, p. 13.

and collaboration? Indeed, if Lacan is justified in using these terms in connection with psychoanalysis, presented as a solution, this is only on condition of a radical recasting of this notion of the way out. First of all, it should be noted that to propose psychoanalysis as a solution, as the way out of capitalism, is only possible in the very specific circumstance of the collapse of the belief in the emancipatory power of critique and negation such as has been incarnated in revolutionary politics. Indeed, one is tempted to say that psychoanalysis, which, according to Lacan, is capable of succeeding there where the politics of emancipation failed, to find a way out of the growing impasses of capitalism, emerges as a *tenant-lieu*, a place-holder of the impossible, absent emancipatory politics. This, however, is only possible inasmuch as psychoanalysis itself is considered by Lacan as a refusal of a sort, more specifically, as a resistance to the pressures of civilisation to conform.

The main difficulty that confronts psychoanalysis in proposing itself as a true way out of contemporary civilisation that Lacan designates as the discourse of the capitalist, is that it must allow for a subjective position that would be antagonistic to that required by capitalism. For Lacan, such a position presents itself in the figure of the saint. Lacan's observations are important for our concerns here because, by designating the saint as the site of resistance, he clearly indicates that a resistance to capitalism, defined as a drive for growth that knows no limits, no beyond, can only be theorised in terms of some resistant instance which is, strictly speaking, neither exterior nor interior, but rather is situated at the point of exteriority in the very intimacy of interiority, the point at which the most intimate encounters the outmost. As is well known, the Lacanian name for this paradoxical intimate exteriority is 'the extimacy'. Conceived in terms of extimacy, rather than in terms of a pure alterity, resistance therefore consists in the derivation, from within capitalism, of an indigestible kernel, of an otherness which has the potential to disrupt the circuit of the drive for growth. The term 'extimacy' illuminates a significant aspect of the way in which the notion of sainthood, as a privileged site of resistance to the capitalist discourse, functioned for Lacan. Sainthood would, therefore, name a model of self-positioning in spaces in which the distinction between the inside and the outside is abolished by the dominant discourse itself. For sainthood, as practiced by the analyst, at least the analyst as Lacan defines him/her, always operates from a stance of heterogeneity and extimacy. Sainthood is an elusive positionality of resistance to the normalising effects of dominant discourse, the

perpetual reassertion of unmasterability. This sort of unmasterability, much more than a hysterical rejection of all social bonds, is precisely what Lacan intended with psychoanalysis as a solution to the deadlocks of the capitalist discourse, indeed, as an exit from it.

One might well agree with Lacan that sainthood can succeed in jamming the machine of production that feeds on the want-to-enjoy, a machine that transforms the lack-of-enjoyment into the desire to enjoy; in a word, that sainthood can interrupt the insatiable 'more' of the drive for growth, to the extent that the saint is one who refuses to produce, but, instead, persists in a certain modality of passivity or inoperativity, indeed, who assumes the position of being useless, but who becomes, paradoxically, useful in this being useless. It should be noted, however, that although it might seem that there is an affinity between the contemporary saint, i.e. the analyst who resists by 'doing nothing,' by refusing to satisfy the demand of capitalist discourse to produce and be useful, and the hysterics who resist the existing symbolic order by refusing to assume the role assigned to them by this order, we believe that it would be a serious error to conflate the resistance offered by the saint with the hysterical 'No!' precisely because the hysterical refusal, instead of impeding the drive for growth, sets it in motion. That is to say, the mere refusal of the given order, of the roles and places that have been distributed and fixed by the 'police', to use Rancière's term, in itself does not bring about a change in the situation. On the contrary, such an answer may well be expected, if not 'orchestrated', by the 'police' itself.

Crucial for our discussion here is that, in a situation in which it seems that there is no option left, Lacan puts forward a solution which consists, ultimately, in identifying the position of the subject, not with the agent or the producer, but with the product or, more precisely, with what remains after production, what is left over, with the trash. Moreover, the analyst is identified with a product that is singularly decreative, in the sense that it puts into question the received idea according to which productive action constitutes the essence of man. Despite some indisputable points of convergence between the becoming useless of Lacan's analyst-saint and the *desoeuvrement* of man—a Kojevian notion taken up by Blanchot and Nancy, as well by Agamben today, and used to describe the status of post-historic man, and a certain modus of passivity that would designate the 'non-acting action' proper to the role to be played by the analyst in an analysis—it is nevertheless clear that something quite different is at stake in Lacan's understanding of the analyst's 'doing nothing'. The saint on which Lacan

models the analyst's refusal, to be useful, to surrender to the demands of capitalism, should be viewed as a singular structural apparatus rather than a vocation. Ultimately, this difference has everything to do with Lacan's conviction that 'the fundamental mainspring of the analytic operation is the maintenance of the distance between the I—identification—and the a [the object]';¹⁴ this allows Lacan to situate the way out proposed by psychoanalysis precisely at the level of that which cannot be represented, the infamous object a, at the level of what is left after the completion of dis-identification. The great virtue of 'sainthood' lies precisely in its undefinability. Without a stable feature, disposition, or set of predetermined actions, the analyst's status can best be described as an 'extimate positionality,' or 'strategic eccentricity' defined by its oppositional character vis-à-vis the position of the subject required, and modelled by the dominant discourse.

What this means is that the subject is invited to occupy the position of the object, a position which requires that charity, as well as distributive justice, are put into question. Indeed, to be able to 'embody what structure entails, namely allowing the subject, the subject of the unconscious, to take him as the cause of the subject's own desire'¹⁵, the saint-analyst must divest himself of the burden of charity. The simplest way of explaining 'what the structure entails' is to say that the analyst's function is to help the subject accede to the point of the choice of being, a kind of return to the point of departure which preceded the attribution of existence, since it allows the subject to regain his/her power of choice in order to confront once more, as it were, the original choice, being/identification, thus allowing him/her to ratify or reject his/her initial, but forced, choice. Briefly put, if what the structure of the analysis entails for the analyst is nothing less than to bring the subject to the point of his/her re-birth, since 'it is as desire's object a, as what he was to the Other in his erection as a living being, as wanted or unwanted when he came into the world, that he is called to be reborn in order to know if he wants what he desires',¹⁶ and if 'it is through the abjection of this cause that the subject in question has a chance to be aware of his position',¹⁷ this is possible on the proviso that the analyst guides the analysand in a wholly

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14 Lacan, 1979, p. 273.

15 Lacan, 1990, p. 15.

16 Lacan, 2006, pp. 571–572.

17 Lacan, 1990, p. 15.

disinterested manner, or, as Lacan remarks, this requires that 'the saint is the refuse of jouissance'.¹⁸ This means that, in order for sainthood to be operational, charity and jouissance must be strictly separated. The important point in all this is that the analyst can be efficacious in the analysis, only, by being placed as the cause of somebody's desire. But, the price to be paid for occupying this position is the analyst's subjective destitution: incarnating the excessive leftover, that which does not count and which, for that reason, finds no place in the given order, the analyst must be willing to exit from human society, in a word, to be a dropout of humanity. Thus, it could be said that the analyst's transformation into a cause of the desire of another subject, the analysand, is 'paid for' by the analyst's conversion into an object.

In his attempt to address the question of the possibility of a way out and the powers of negation in our time, Badiou, proposes a different solution: one that essentially mobilises philosophy. Setting out from the present crisis of negation, the task of philosophy, as Badiou sees it, can be none other than to forge a 'a new logic, a new philosophical proposition adequate for all forms of creative novelty',¹⁹ a new logical framework, in which the relationship between negation and creation and, consequently, the relation of politics and philosophy, is radically recasted. The solution proposed by Badiou consists of reversing classical dialectical logic, rather than simply opting for a non-mediated affirmation, as contemporary Spinozist, such as Negri, do. More specifically, philosophy today has to invent a new dialectics, an affirmative dialectics, to be precise, in which 'affirmation, or the positive proposition, comes before negation instead after it'.²⁰ Ultimately, the novelty of this relationship between affirmation and negation stands out in the construction of 'a dialectical framework where something of the future comes before the negative present'.²¹

This curious temporal loop, where the future precedes the present, is only conceivable within a space that is, itself, constructed through subtraction. Just like psychoanalysis for Lacan, philosophy for Badiou presents itself as such a space, that is situated within the existing world, while remaining at a distance from the structuring principles of

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18 Lacan, 1990, p. 16.

19 Badiou, 2014, p. 45.

20 Badiou, 2014, p. 46.

21 Badiou, 2014, p. 46.

that world. For psychoanalysis, as Lacan conceives and practices it, and philosophy, as Badiou understands it, the main problem is that of an immanent or internal way out, which can only be practiced through the creation of a space of independence and autonomy vis-à-vis the existing regime of domination. Philosophy and psychoanalysis confront the same topological difficulty, namely, the identification of a point at which the outside meets the inside, as it is only from such a point that it is possible to radically modify the relation between the possible and the impossible, which, in turn, allows the transformation of the very transcendental framework that determines our reality. On this view, the task of philosophy is, in a sense, quite modest: 'to throw light on the fundamental choices of thought,'²² whose novelty, i.e. time breaking and the existing world transcending quality, can only be evaluated from a perspective that is outside or, at least, at a distance from power, the dominant master discourse. For philosophy, to be able to clarify such transtemporal and transworldly choices, or decisions, this requires that it takes as its compass the affirmation of the taking place of an extimate exception in a given situation, whose taking place in that situation disrupts its structuring principles. The proper value of this irruption of the impossible-real, to borrow Lacan's term, consists of a radical modification of the existing relation between the possible and the impossible. It constitutes an event in Badiou's sense by creating an unheard of possibility. Hence, an event is worthy of the name precisely to the extent in which it 'interrupts the law, the rules of the structure of the situation, and thus creates a new possibility'²³. This opening of a new possibility is the beginning of a process of 'the possibility of realising/ materialising the consequences of this new possibility,'²⁴ the elaboration of which could amount to the creation of a new situation. This also explains why contemporary philosophy cannot simply satisfy itself with maintaining a critical distance vis-à-vis the world as it is.

Philosophy's task today is more complex, and ambitious, at the same time. Badiou claims that the contemporary world, described as 'a sort of anarchy of more or less regulated, more or less coded fluxes, where money, products, and images are exchanged',²⁵ precisely because

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22 Badiou, 2009b, p. 19.

23 Badiou, 2014, p. 48.

24 Badiou, 2014, p. 47.

25 Badiou, 2004, p. 48.

it is as it is, precarious, inconsistent, illegible, needs philosophy, and specifically it needs a philosophy committed to chance and risk, 'a philosophy opened to the singularity of what happens, a philosophy that can be fed and nourished by the surprise of the unexpected'.²⁶ But, in order to be able to respond to this need, and thus to resist the pressures of today's world, philosophy must be able to propose a principle of interruption, i.e. 'something which can interrupt this endless regime of circulation'²⁷ that renders our world fragmentary and illegible. The imperative that contemporary philosophy confronts is that '*there be* such an interruption point', precisely because such a 'point of discontinuity', 'an unconditional point', allows thought to extract itself from the world and to remain in 'confrontation in the world as it is'²⁸. And, to the extent that in our world of endless and extremely fast changes, which is due to this speed rendered incoherent, inconsistent, in short, illegible, the logic which is specifically undone there ... the logic of time'²⁹, the task of philosophy today, instead of trying in vain to follow the quick pace of the world, is rather to strive for a 'retardation', as Badiou puts it. Hence, philosophy 'must construct a time for thought, which, in the face of the injunction to speed, will constitute a time of its own.'³⁰ Indeed, it is its slow, and, thus, rebellious thinking that makes it possible for philosophy to establish the fixed point in a world that never ceases to change. One is, therefore, almost tempted to say that, in saving itself, philosophy saves the world too.

Philosophy, in Badiou's view, is a paradoxical turning towards its time, its actuality, a turning which involves a curious torsion of the thought of time onto itself. Or, to be even more precise, this torsion that philosophy is a turning of time onto itself, a return of time to itself. Put otherwise, to evade the powerlessness of thought, philosophy turns towards the past, not, of course, in order to save it, but rather to produce a new kind of the present – a paradoxical endeavour as it is a matter of producing within the worldly present a new present – while relating to something that has already disappeared, namely the event. Being nothing but an act that separates truth from opinions, yet capable

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26 Badiou, 2004, pp. 55-56.

27 Badiou, 2004, p. 49.

28 Badiou, 2004, p. 40.

29 Badiou, 2004, p. 51.

30 Badiou, 2004, p. 51.

nonetheless of producing some unpredictable, non-controllable effects in the world, philosophy is not allowed to make mistakes. This is why, in a sense, philosophy shares the destiny of the faithful subject. It has to take, as its compass, the real that assigns it its conditions: truth procedures and their destiny in the current times.

Taking up Hegel's metaphor of Minerva's owl that takes flight only at nightfall, in short, when all is said and done, Badiou claims that philosophy as such always comes after the fact. Indeed, by coming 'after', philosophy is constitutively anachronistic in its own time. This may explain why, for Badiou, the central task of philosophy is to draw up a balance-sheet of its own time. To think its time means, for Badiou, that philosophy has to detect points of interruption which mark a break with the previous paradigm of thinking, and, as a consequence, inaugurate a new time, and start a new counting of time. More specifically, philosophy could be designed as an attempt to isolate, to extract the real of its own time or, to paraphrase Badiou, literally 'wrench time from time',³¹ in order to reveal those unheard of possibilities of which time, because of the constraints of reality, did not know that it was capable, to identify those points at which the impossibility of a given time turns into a possibility of some unheard of novelty, allowing for a definitely new beginning.

Yet in an interview with *Le Magazine Littéraire*, following the publication of his book, which was, as its very title signals, *Le Siècle (The Century)*, conceived as a philosophical balance-sheet of the past century, Badiou introduces a new definition of philosophy's task in a striking and at the same time enigmatic fashion, by stating that, by definition, philosophy comes 'after', after the fact, yet despite, or more precisely because of this, as philosophers we also have 'the possibility to come before, if we assume that, by means of the categories that we forge, something of that of which we have been belated contemporaries, is gathered together, brought back to life'.³² By transmitting to the younger generation something truly new that its time has produced, philosophy, although coming after, nevertheless tries to come before. In so doing, philosophy would 'remain an eternal and irreplaceable witness of the manner in which it has received and sheltered something which has also disappeared. Philosophy will have thus changed the

31 Badiou, 2007, p. 21.

32 Badiou, 2005a, p. 96.

disappearance into the possibility of an appearance.'³³

By being intrinsically late, by coming 'after', that is, once the event that has inaugurated a truth procedure has already disappeared, i.e. by situating itself in this delay, lagging behind, philosophy is capable of wrenching, extracting from its own time, something more in the times than time itself, the instant of 'eternity' as the *objet a*, a bit of the real that remains irreducible to chronological time. Yet the price to be paid by philosophy, insofar as it is true to its task – to identify the real of its own time, is that its own gesture is displaced, ex-centric, ultimately anachronistic, in relation to its time. But it is precisely on the basis of its ex-centricity, I would argue, that the philosophical gesture of 'seizing truths' is a paradoxical 'after' that is, at the same time, 'before'. Perhaps the most surprising short-circuit Badiou brings up in his engagement with the structural delay of philosophy, this temporality proper to philosophy qua philosophy, can be found in a paradoxical cleavage of philosophy: insofar as it seeks to think its time, philosophy is forced to anticipate 'to some extent the welcoming and sheltering of these fragile procedures in thought... of which the mere possibility is still not firmly established',³⁴ and it, philosophy, is necessarily divided between a 'balance-sheet' and a manifesto, an announcement of the future orientation of thought. What becomes of philosophy as conditioned by its conditions in worldless times? How can philosophy continue to operate in accordance with the task it has set for itself, without the possible overstepping of the limits imposed on it, that is, as a philosophy 'under the condition', and thus usurping the place of one of its conditions?

While it is true that '[p]hilosophy does not itself produce any effective truth,' by recognising and seizing novelties as truths, but first of all by announcing that they exist, philosophy 'turns time toward eternity – since every truth, as a generic infinity, is eternal'³⁵. One can see now more clearly in what way philosophy is concerned with the question of the existence of truths. It is not philosophy that makes a truth eternal. What philosophy can do, however, is to make 'disparate truths compossible'. In so doing, it 'states the being of the time in

33 Badiou, 2005a, p. 96

34 Badiou, 1999, p. 38.

35 Badiou, 2005b, p. 14.

which it operates as the time of the truths'.³⁶ That there be truths is an imperative shared by philosophy and its conditions. Indeed, it points to a co-responsibility of the conditions of philosophy, which produce truths, and philosophy, which 'under the condition that there are truths, is duty-bound to make them manifest'³⁷. Arguably, there is no problem to heroize the present when something radically new takes place. It is, however, more difficult to extract something eternal from worldless times. Hence, it remains an open question how the mobilisation of philosophy during intervallic, 'empty' times, such as ours, is to be thought.

In intervallic times, i.e. periods in which nothing new (seems to) take(s) place, philosophy, in particular one which defines itself as a philosophy of the event, that is, a philosophy which, because it cannot directly create novelty, or force the events, but can only record its traces in thought; philosophy which is, ultimately, under the condition of its conditions, seems to lose its reason d'être. What, in fact, could be the task of a philosophy which is "under the condition of its conditions" if these conditions seem to be unable to produce something new? In effect, in 'atonic' worlds, the duty of philosophy may well remain to think at 'the breach in time'³⁸. However, insofar as, in worldless times, such a 'breach in time', a bifurcation of time, or the co-existence of two, heterogeneous times, historical time and eventual time or the time of truths, is obliterated, practically invisible, to the point that the inhabitants of such a world are unable to even conceive of the possibility of another world, the role and the importance of philosophy seems to increase. If philosophy is not eternally condemned to 'come after', that is, to make a balance-sheet of its time, but is also required to be contemporary with its time, coming from a thinker committed to a philosophy 'under conditions', cannot but come as a surprise. Does it mean that philosophy should be descending in the playground previously assigned to its "conditions" in order to prove that it is indeed capable of being contemporary with its time, that it can actively contribute to the creation of the present, this being the only time of truths?

The difficulty that philosophy faces today is that, precisely as the

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³⁶ Badiou, 2005b, p. 14.

³⁷ Badiou, 2005b, p. 15.

³⁸ Badiou, 1999, p. 38.

owl of Minerva, that is to say, coming "after" the event, it must prove that it can also be truly contemporary to its time, that is to say, capable of taking part, participating, together with 'its' conditions, in bringing new truths to life. The very formulation of this task has some major repercussions for the definition of the role of philosophy. Indeed, does Badiou's canonical definition of the task of philosophy allow for such an extension, making it possible for philosophy to legitimately take on this additional burden in intervallic times? It appears as if philosophy, in order to survive in worldless times, while searching for a remedy for the current illegibility of the world and the subsequent disorientation of its inhabitants, is itself forced to step out of its self-imposed role and to take upon itself the role of one of its (nowadays) de-activated conditions. Generally speaking, the task proper to philosophy is to isolate the moments of 'eternity' by drawing up the famous balance-sheet for its time because, for Badiou, 'every world is capable of producing within itself its own truth'.³⁹ If philosophy is summoned today to make a wager à la Pascal, this is because, in our time of disorientation and wordlessness, only philosophy, insofar as its task is to isolate the moments of the "eternal", that is to say, a sort of trans-historicity, thereby implying that these novelties which emerge as an exception to the law of its concrete historical situation are at the same time trans-situational and trans-historical, can claim that these "eternal truths" can be brought to life, resuscitated in a new present of another world or another time.

It is at this juncture that we can return to Badiou's enigmatic formula that philosophy comes at once both 'after' and 'before'. Borrowing Shakespeare's term, the time of philosophy could be characterised as a time out of joint. In effect, situated in-between events and their truth procedures, thus, at once the follower and the precursor of truths, philosophy thus seems to embody the out-of-jointedness of the present of the eventually created truths. Philosophy is 'normally' supposed to come 'after' its conditions, by providing a space in which the compossibility of these heterogeneous trajectories of singular truth procedures can be inscribed. However, under exceptional circumstances, in a crisis situation, situations in which what is at stake is the orientation in thought, and, consequently, in existence, philosophy's task is to provide a diagnosis of its time by characterising its time as the time of worldlessness, which entails, at the subjective

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³⁹ Badiou, 2009a, p. 8.

level, a profound disorientation. While it may well be true that '[e]very world is capable of producing within itself its own truth', as Badiou claims, in the meantime, while no new truth seems to be emerging, philosophy should propose, as a remedy for the current confusion and disorientation, a balance sheet of the time in which truth procedures have produced something new, new eternal truths. At the same time Badiou claims, more ambitiously, that on the basis of the given balance-sheet, '[p]hilosophy has no other legitimate aim except to help find the new names that will bring into existence the unknown world that is only waiting for us because we are waiting for it'.⁴⁰ This, of course, is not to be understood in the sense that philosophy should assume the task of ordering, but rather in the sense of a wager of philosophy, or, more properly, the wager that philosophy itself is namely nothing other than a belief that contemporary philosophy is 'capable of enveloping today's actions and drawing strength, tomorrow, from what these actions will produce'⁴¹.

But this is only possible if philosophy presents itself today as a paradoxical articulation, or a knotting of a balance-sheet of the past and a manifesto enveloping the precarious present of the emerging novelties in a fiction of the future of this nascent present. Just like avant-garde's proclamations, philosophy, today, must provide formulas to 'invent a future for the present' of truths, without being 'certain whether the thing itself is already present'⁴². Indeed, it is such an 'envelopment of a real present in a fictive future'⁴³ that can reveal that the present is a fabrication, a production, but precisely for that reason, the 'recognition of the fabrication of a present can rally people to the politics of emancipation, or to a contemporary art'⁴⁴. In light of this, it is no accident that philosophy, when faced with the task of enveloping something that is in the process of emerging, far from striving for a kind of pre-evental forcing, privileges the form of manifestos in those in-between, intervallic periods, when 'wheels turn idly', in the 'empty time' that is incapable of producing something new or worthy of thought, those times in which 'nothing happens' and when it seems that philosophy itself has no

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40 Badiou, 2003.

41 Badiou, 2009a, p. 7.

42 Badiou, 2007, pp. 138-139.

43 Badiou, 2007, p. 139.

44 Badiou, 2007, p. 140.

raison d'être.

This is crucial to solving the problem of the survival of philosophy in worldless times. In trying to be contemporary by being non-contemporary, the task of contemporary philosopher remains 'to be of one's time, through an unprecedented manner of not being in one's time'.⁴⁵ At the same time, philosophy must show reserve: its immediate goal is not to change the world, but our way of thinking. Ultimately, the task of philosophy today should be to strive, in the words of Badiou, for a "revolution in mind", one that would help restore thought's capacity for action. For Badiou, this requires a specific subjective attitude, one that he has himself discerned in Pascal and what I propose to call the stance of a militant anachronism.

Thus, it is precisely in turning to the present conjecture, qualified as an intervallic, 'empty time,' in which nothing new emerges, that philosophy finds itself assigned a new supplementary task. For the present to have a future, the question of the present must be posed in terms of a paradoxical obligation to the past. How are we to understand this obligation to the past? For Badiou, whenever there is no present, when the present is lacking, this necessarily entails the lack of the past too, the latter being reduced to a mere mortifying commemoration. A living past, a past that is genealogically linked to the present presupposes, however, that there be a present, itself linked or pointing towards the future. Yet, as Badiou never tires of reminding us, the concern of the obligation of the past is always the present and, by way of consequence, the future of this present. Badiou's thesis here is namely that with the obliteration of the eventual past, by means of its negation, obscuring or criminalisation, it is the present, the actuality, which also disappears. The issue of the transmission of the past, of its restoration, is at the centre of contemporary preoccupations with the possibility of a change that would mark a clean break with the past and project itself into the future, declaring the advent of a new way of thinking and, consequently, of being.

Why mobilise philosophy? And more specifically, not just any kind of philosophy, but precisely philosophy of the event, a philosophy, to which some major ruptures of its time assign its condition. Setting out from a mixture of hope and conviction, so characteristic of his militant style of philosophising, Badiou claims that, strictly speaking, for philosophy of the event, the new century has not yet truly begun.

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45 Badiou, 2007, p. 21.

At this point, Badiou seems to be conjuring a court-circuit of two, at first glance, contradictory theses: for the new century to finally begin, it is necessary for philosophy to turn to its proper time, to its actuality, as it is: presentless and worldless, a world of a deep confusion and disorientation, too, evidenced in the very fact that, for us, the 20th century, in its passion for the real, is incomprehensible. At the same time, the truths resulting from the eventual breaks in the 20th century constitute the condition, moreover, an active condition, for our transitional event-less period. The question that philosophy must pose at this juncture is therefore the following: What makes it possible for the vacuity of nihilism to continue, how is this vacuity to be determined if it makes its endless continuation possible?

It is precisely at this juncture that Badiou mobilises the power of philosophy: it is contemporary philosophy's duty to uphold the following injunction: 'The new century cannot indefinitely continue in deploying its vacuity. The new century must therefore finally begin.'⁴⁶ For Badiou, the 20th century, while it has undoubtedly brought about some novelties that will remain "for ever," nevertheless it represents a closed sequence in which these innovations were deployed. Hence, the new century, which has hardly begun, cannot pretend to simply continue within the same framework of thought. But if we cannot return to the forms in which the eternal truths of the 20th century emerged, it is nevertheless the case that the 20th century, as Badiou insists, is still very much a part of the active conditions for 21st century thought. What, in effect, is still alive of the 20th century and immune to the change of the epoch? How, indeed, can we return to the century of the "passion of the real", an affect that our century not only does not share with the past century, but tries to avoid at all costs? How, to return to the 20th century, the century of events, which is for us literally inconceivable? It is at this point at which the question of transmission as a condition for a new beginning is posed with all urgency that philosophy is called to intervene.

In contrast to the 1960s and 1970s, when the question of the beginning could still animate philosophy, based on the conviction that thought itself is capable of orienting, if not of inaugurating, a new beginning, the end of the 20th century, and the beginning of the 21st century, are marked by a loss of the belief in the very possibility of a new commencement. Today we thus seem to be in a worse position than Mallarmé, who, after the defeat of the event of his time, the Paris

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⁴⁶ Badiou, 2005c.

Commune, declared: 'There is no Present, no, a present does not exist. Unless the Crowd declares itself.'⁴⁷ If we are to follow Badiou, Mallarmé could designate his time as an epoch without a present, to the extent that he established a direct nexus between the presence of the popular subjectivity on the scene of history and the production of the present. Thus, by referring the lack of a present to the absence of the crowd, that is, in Badiou's terms, by positing the eventual rupture as a 'condition for the presence of the present'⁴⁸, Mallarmé announced the beginning of a more or less long period in which emancipatory politics is limited, that is, until the re-appearance of the 'crowd', to 'restricted action'.

While Mallarmé's conclusion that there is no present, because there is no event, does not, however, exclude the possibility that in some unforeseeable future a new event might inaugurate the present that we lack today; for us, even this timid hope must be quenched. The prevailing opinion regarding the new beginning could be summed up as follows: not only did nothing take place but the place, to borrow Mallarmé's celebrated formula, but, more drastically, the current 'shortage' of events, the feeling that there are no more history-breaking events to be expected, is a clear sign that we are living in the times of the end of time, a time which excludes, by definition, the very possibility of something new taking place.

Our era could, then, be designated as an era of amnesia, a peculiar amnesia to be sure, since we are not dealing here simply with the forgetting of some past events whose effects, to paraphrase Lacan, have stopped being written in the present conjecture: it is not merely about forgetting the forgotten. The amnesia of the amnesia is rather an anticipation of the amnesia, a readiness to forget in advance, a programmed amnesia, so to speak. Hence, for us, something is doomed to be forgotten even before it has actually taken place. This anticipated, programmed amnesia is, namely, the ability to wipe out not only what has happened, but to annihilate the very idea of the possibility for something to happen, in short, the ability to erase the possibility of the possible. What is crucial today, however, is not the question: how to restore the traces of the forgotten/effaced past, but rather: how to neutralise our readiness in advance to forget? Briefly put, how to intervene before this bifurcation of time takes place?

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⁴⁷ Mallarmé, 1976, p. 257.

⁴⁸ Badiou, 2005b, p. 31.

It is precisely in the present conjecture of the amnesia of the possibility of another world that, for Badiou, the articulation of philosophy's contemporaneity to the question of transmission has attained its central place. It is not a question, here, of merely bridging the temporal gap between the generation of the sixties and the present generation. What is at stake here, is nothing less than the possibility of transmission under the circumstances of contemporary nihilism, a transmission from the 'evental generation', a generation that, in effect, experienced in the 1960s, if only for a brief moment, the possibility of a new beginning in the guise of a categorical departure from the existing state of affairs, to a properly nihilistic generation, marked, not by the event but by its absence, a generation that was literally marked by the nothing, a generation that was under the spell of the dominant ideology, according to which a new beginning is no longer possible. How then can the past beginning be inscribed in such a conjecture in which the gap separating the evental from the nihilistic generation seems to be ineliminable?

The question of transmission is the question of a singular relation to the times, or, more properly, a question of the restitution of the moment of the real that evades all integration into chronological time, into history, a moment of the real insofar as the real is fundamentally trans-historic. In light of this, it could be said that the past, the present, and the future, are less to be understood as chronological categories than as specific subjectivations of time. In this context, the current amnesia of the beginning could be viewed as a peculiar subjectivation of time, a mode of the subjective time, characterised by the erasure of all discontinuity. This principled indistinction between a 'before' and an 'after', that is at the core of the 'amnesic' operation, produces a new temporal figure, that of the present without the future. The amnesia of the beginning, or, rather, of its possibility, is namely a subjectivation of time that denies the event as a clear-cut interruption by inscribing it back into history as one of those things that simply happen. By denying the discontinuity in which the eventness of the event consists, the amnesia of the amnesia not only annihilates the past, but also the future. Not, of course, some abstract future, but the future of the very present, the future of its proper present. It is therefore not enough to say that for an amnesic subject nothing has happened, that the past event is but an illusion. It would be more appropriate to say that for him nothing can happen. And it is only in this sense that it could be said that for an amnesic subject there is no such thing as a beginning or an event. In a

sense, for such a subject everything will go on as before, things will not stop happening for him, for that matter, but nothing that will happen to him could be considered a clear-cut rupture capable of founding a new time and thus inaugurating a new historical epoch.

How can a break, a rupture, be transmitted since it is an experience, an encounter with the real, which precludes all idea of a common denominator between a generation of rupture and a generation of amnesia, an experience that implies the affirmation of the irreducible distance between the two generations? How, then, is it possible to insist on the possibility, necessity even, of transmission? What can be the 'object' of such transmission if the emphasis is put on discontinuity rather than on continuity? Indeed, what is at issue in such transmission cannot be simply the establishment of the continuity between the past and the present. In contrast to history, which, in order to ensure temporal continuity, is precisely immune to all breaks, all discontinuity, such transmission aims at wrenching from the times something eternal, to use Foucault's expression, the present's immanent eternity, which cannot be integrated into history, or stored in the archives of memory. Ultimately, what such transmission brings to light is the moment when time is literally suspended, that impossible non-temporal instant before the bifurcation of time into a 'before' and an 'after' takes place, which Badiou qualifies as the 'present without the presence'.

Here, the relation between transmission and the beginning, fundamental in contemporary philosophy, becomes evident, here it also shows its political relevance. For Badiou, it is certain that the evental rupture, alone, establishes the possibility of transmission. To be sure, for there to be a transmission at all, something must have taken place. The beginning is therefore a condition for transmission. Today, however, with the loss of faith in the very possibility of a new beginning, the causal relation between transmission and commencement is inverted. The inversion of the relationship between transmission and commencement has an implication at the level of the restoration of belief in the possibility of a new commencement. Indeed, one might argue that transmission today appears as a first step in the opening of a space for the inscription of a new breach in time, a new beginning to come. From such a perspective, without constituting the sole condition of the possibility of a new commencement, transmission could nonetheless be considered an operation that opens up the possibility of the beginning precisely there where the beginning seems to be impossible.

Amnesia and transmission are, thus, two drastically

heterogeneous, ultimately mutually exclusive relations to the past and to time in general. While amnesia aims to re-inscribe within history that which cannot be inscribed into it, an unforeseeable, non-derived interruption, transmission is forced to break with history in order to save something of the past, but in so doing it secures the present for the sake of the future.

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How do we recognize strong critique?

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ABSTRACT:

Partially following Gilles Deleuze, I articulate six criteria for a *strong* variety of critique: one which affirms the power of thought in going all the way to the limit of existing societies, situations, institutions and practices. The form of this strong critique is a complex unity of thought and life that can be indicated, as I argue, on the basis of a twofold condition: a contemporary repetition of the classical structuralism that Deleuze develops in the 1967 article “How do we recognize structuralism?” and a formally based reflection on the properly *infinite* dimension of structure and sense. I develop the implications of this strong critique under contemporary conditions, distinguishing it from various alternative current forms of sociopolitical critique and non-critique. In particular I argue that through its articulation of the consequences of constitutive paradox, the structure of the situationally undecidable, and the ineffectivity characteristic of the constitution of sense, strong critique offers appropriate forms of response in thought and action to the structural problems and antagonisms characteristic of contemporary global capitalism.

Keywords:

Critique, Deleuze, infinite, paradoxico-critical, undecidable, ineffective

In his 1965 short monograph *Nietzsche*, Gilles Deleuze indicates the complex condition of a strong variety of critique:

The philosopher of the future is the explorer of ancient worlds, of peaks and caves, who creates only inasmuch as he recalls something that has been essentially forgotten. That something, according to Nietzsche, is the unity of life and thought. It is a complex unity: one step for life, one step for thought. Modes of life inspire ways of thinking; modes of thinking create ways of living. Life *activates* thought, and thought in turn *affirms* life.¹

This two-step unity of an “active life and an affirmative thinking,” according to Deleuze, is the condition under which philosophy can be understood as a force of creation and positive legislation, acting both as the “critique of all established values,” and also at the same time

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¹ Deleuze 1965, p. 66.

to invent new “values of life that call for another principle.”² From the perspective of this dual movement of activation and affirmation, the Kantian, limitative variety of critique will always, Deleuze suggests, have failed to go far enough.³ For if Kant has criticized the pretention of knowledge to exceed pre-established bounds, he has nevertheless never questioned the value of knowledge itself. And if he has aimed to critique the ways in which the interests of reason take it beyond the limits of its proper application, he has never questioned the basis for the drawing of these limits or the designation of their propriety. Indeed, whenever critique operates as negativity and delimitative bounding, Deleuze suggests, the original principle of an affirmative power of critique grounded in life has already been lost.⁴ With this operation, reactive forces triumph over active ones, the creation of new values is replaced by the preservation and guardianship of established ones, and the ruinous subjugation of critique to the defense of the existing institutions of state, religion and morality is never far behind. The condition for this transformation of critique into preservation and affirmation into negativity is itself simple and unitary: it is that life and the world are judged from a position beyond both, a “higher” value which makes thought the “measure” and “limit” exercised in the name of it.⁵ Nevertheless, the historical triumph of the reactive limitative and negative critique must have its ultimate prior basis in the affirmative forces themselves, and in the original difference which is both their form and their dynamism.

My aim in this essay is to articulate and develop the implications of this strong critique under contemporary conditions, distinguishing it from various alternative contemporary forms of sociopolitical critique and non-critique. With respect to the critical role of thought itself, these positions largely exhibit, as I shall argue, two broad kinds of structures. First, residual forms of limitative or finitist critique confine the pretensions of thought on the structural basis of the faculties of an individual or collective normative subject, or mobilize this delimitation, following Hegel, by deploying ultimately theological figures of the absolute. Second, there is an activist appeal

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2 Deleuze 1965, p. 69.

3 Deleuze 1965, p. 70.

4 Deleuze 1965, pp. 73-75.

5 Deleuze 1965, pp. 78-79.

that predicates itself on the eventual grace of a “generic” infinity but thereby also abandons the specific structure of reflexive and internal critique itself. These contrasting forms, of regulative critical finitism on the one hand and noncritical speculative/generic infinitism on the other, produce a twofold political impasse. On the one hand, the regulation of subjective structures in the name of existing institutions functions as the essentially conservative politics of the *telos* of mutual recognition. And on the other the marginal appeal to an activism predicated on the structure of a messianic or eschatological hope summons what thereby can only appear as a “weak” power of thought, subordinated to the exigency of an exterior event, in response to the ubiquity of contemporary resignation. By contrast with these, it is possible formally to indicate the structure of a *strong* critique rooted in the exposure and development of the real contradictions structurally characteristic of the “global” situation insofar as it operatively totalizes itself in the dominant forms of contemporary life. This verifies, as I shall argue, the possibility of a direct and transformative intervention by thought in contemporary life and practice itself.

If the configurations of critique always turns on the forms in which thought’s power meets the limit at which it confronts being in itself, then the development of their schemas necessarily involves an investigation of the formalism of limits, borders, totalities and wholes. To indicate the formal structure of strong critique, it suffices, as we shall see, to discern the *fundamental orientations of thought* which unfold the formal ideas of completeness, consistency and reflexivity as they structure the configurations in which the real of being gives itself to be thought. A decisive factor in each case of this “metaformal” reflection is the *infinite* dimension of reflexive form as it operates and problematizes itself in signs, or in language as structure in general. In the 1967 article, “How do we recognize structuralism?” Deleuze articulates this then-“timely” question according to seven interlinked criteria.⁶ Each of the criteria turns in one way or another on the distinctive structuralist discovery of a register of the *symbolic* that is characterized neither by the immediacy of the real nor by the mimetic doubling of the imaginary, but rather by the wholly distinct dimension of structures as constitutive systems of differences. Under the heading of the last of the criteria, “From the Subject to Practice,” Deleuze emphasizes how the demonstration carried out by Althusser and his collaborators of the structural origin of

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6 “How do we Recognize Structuralism?” (Deleuze, 1967).

systematic contradiction verifies the maxim that “the real, the imaginary and their relations are always engendered secondarily by the functioning of the structure, which starts by having its primary effects in itself.”⁷

According to Deleuze, the “very special” characteristics of an event that is “interior” to structure and characterized by its proper effect here make for a thinking of the point of the possible transformation of existing societies and systems, thereby defining a “therapeutic or political” “praxis, or rather the very site where praxis must take hold.”⁸ These last criteria of praxis nevertheless remain, for Deleuze in 1967, the “most obscure” and “the criteria of the future.”⁹

It is possible to indicate the basis of a strong critique and practice of the transformation of existing societies, standards, norms and values today, as I shall argue, by means of a contemporary repetition of Deleuze’s structuralist gesture, one which also develops the formal consequences of structure’s inherent passage to infinity. It is under such a twofold condition of structuralist and meta-formal reflection that, in particular, a form of critique adequately responsive to the most ubiquitous and problematic institutions and practices of contemporary life can today be produced.

First Criterion: Beyond (the critique of) Finitude

If there is to be a principled critique of existing institutions, practices, and social structures today, it must go beyond the classical Kantian form: that of the critique of the exercise of the faculties of a determinate and finite subject. Within this classical form, critique is always the delimitation of the *proper* activities of the faculties, their distinction from one another and the regulation of the pretensions of reason to overstep its own bounds. Reason proposes, as regulative, the principle on the basis of which its finite forms will always point beyond themselves, leading to the limitative criticism of this pretension or, since it can never be separated from the work of reason itself, an interminable dialectic of unavoidable illusion at its core. In Kant’s practical philosophy, the manner in which reason reflexively postulates this regulation to itself yields the authority of its self-affection in simultaneously formulating and submitting itself to an interior moral law. The direct political

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⁷ Deleuze, 1967, p. 191.

⁸ Deleuze, 1967, p. 191.

⁹ Deleuze, 1967, p. 192.

correlate of this private and individual self-submission on the part of the transcendental subject is the distinction Kant articulates in “What is Enlightenment?” between a “public” and a “private” use of reason, and the corresponding maxim of intersubjective behavior: “Argue as much as you like about whatever you like, but obey!”

From a formal point of view, what is essential about this configuration is that the infinite is here allowed to subsist only as the regulative ideal or the infinitely exiguous demand to which finite thought and practice is submitted, whereas it always appears in activity or achieved knowledge only as the *potentially* infinite and never as an actually completed and thinkable whole. This specific conception of the infinite is the index of a singular *orientation of thought*, a distinctive schema of the relationship of thought and being in themselves, one original with Kant and still characteristic of widespread and typical forms of contemporary conviction. On the basis of the manner in which it regulates the elements of a positive and bounded regime of knowledge or thought, it can be called the *constructivist* orientation. What is formally characteristic of this position is that it assays the limit of a determinate and consistent totality of the known or thinkable at a time by means of the external imposition of its distinctive criteria, while meanwhile the contradictions and antinomies of the world as an existent whole are treated as the index and proof of the essential *localization* of this consistent knowledge rather than as real in themselves. Its general structure is not only the basis of Kant’s own transcendental idealism, but also that of the various contemporary forms of historicism, pragmatism, and anthropologism characterizing (what is most often understood as) “critical” social thought today.

Another kind of position than Kant’s, although one still very much located (as we shall see) within the “critique of finitude” in an extended sense, is produced by construing antinomy and contradiction, by contrast, as real and not ideal, but nevertheless appropriating these structures within a more general logic of the submission of finitude to the infinite as absolute. This position is Hegel’s, and it is within its formal outlines that we must understand Hegel’s own critique of Kant. Here, in particular, the structure of the dialectic provides a determining basis for the critical limit of finitude to be mobilized in the relentless infinite development of sublation and determinate negation.

Thus developing the implications of the specific reality of contradiction and thereby of the real structural effectivity of an actual-infinite that is no longer only potential, does Hegel’s dialectical

corrective provide, by contrast with the Kantian analytic, the basis for a *strong* critique grounded in the affirmative power of thought? It does not, for what is doubtless a familiar reason. For if the Hegelian dialectic indeed infinitely mobilizes the structure of critical delimitation as determinate negation, it does so only within the ambit of the general form of an infinite determined as *absolute*, or as total and consistent within itself. Thus, although the Hegelian dialectic operates as a “critique of finitude” in a different and more comprehensive sense than Kant’s, it is nevertheless still marked as the critique *of* the finite in its relentless inscription of all finite wholes in the ambit and principle of this infinite absolute. The structural basis of this inscription is the dialectical opposition it presents between the finite and the infinite, whereby the unlimited serial development of the finite at first involves a “bad infinite” of empty or merely potential continuation, before being reappropriated by means of its sublation into a “good infinite” that reconciles both the (earlier) infinite and the finite itself.¹⁰

The idea of an absolute totality with no outside, one which envelops all differences, including that between the finite and the infinite within itself, is the characteristic figure of the infinite within a second orientation of thought, the *onto-theological* orientation. This orientation should certainly be sharply distinguished from the constructivist one, which, as we have seen, by contrast thinks the infinite as never actual but only potential or regulative, and the line of totality as drawn from outside by means of externally posited criteria. Nevertheless, the Hegelian dialectic represents, from this perspective, the most developed possible *combination* of the constructivist orientation which assays thought’s power from the perspective of the finite constitution of faculties, and the onto-theological one which subordinates it to the transcendence of an absolute whole and totality. This specific combination in the

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10 Contemporary Hegelians often argue that the “Absolute” does not figure, in Hegel’s thought, as a kind of total overarching principle or final and static position at which thought would finally rest, satisfied with itself in comprehending in ultimate terms the whole of reality: the “absolute knowing” described in the last section of the *Phenomenology* is not absolute *knowledge* and even the “attainment” of the absolute is consistent with its continuing ongoing dynamism after (or even through) that attainment. The point may be granted in the present context, since it does not affect the different structural consideration that is at issue here. In particular, the significance of the absolute-infinite in the dialectic is not, for present purposes, that it represents (or does not) a final stopping point or completed position of total knowledge, but just that it assures that dialectical transitions have a unitary and progressive form determined finally by the dialectic of the finite and the “bad” and the “good” infinite. In any case, since my aim here is not primarily to interpret Hegel but rather just to assay the form and structure of some contemporary projects that see themselves as Hegelian, nothing essential to the argument turns on the question of what Hegel himself meant by the “Absolute”.

overarching medium of the absolute is indeed the only possible outcome of Hegel’s attempt to think the absolute itself both as substance *and* as subject. In this combination, what is always missed is the specific structure of an infinite that is never absolute, or a totality that is inscribed only on the basis and with the correlate of its own constitutive inconsistency with itself. Along with this, what is missed on the level of logical determination in the dialectic itself is, as Deleuze himself never tires of pointing out, the principle of a prior insistent difference, founded in the first instance on paradox and kind of structurally irresolvable contradiction to which it gives rise.

We can witness some of the contemporary political consequences of this appeal to the onto-theological absolute by considering its symmetrical effects, on opposite sides, in the positive projects of both “left” (Marxist) and “right” (non-Marxist or liberal) contemporary Hegelianisms. On the “right” side, the problem of reconciling the force and authority of the “normative” with the reflexive structure of autonomy – a problem already posed with Kant’s conception of the force of normativity as turning on its recognition by a subject – is seen as requiring, in addition to the regular functioning of a subject’s own capacities, her participation in a communal *Sittlichkeit*, or membership in an “ethical community” or “ethical life.”¹¹ This means that in order to be fully autonomous or fully constituted as an agent, one must participate in a “whole complex of practices and institutions” that give our actions and reasons meaning by ensuring the possibility of their intelligibility as such.¹² The Kantian constructivist appeal to the reflexive functioning of the individual subject in giving itself the law is thus seen as necessarily supplemented by the “achievement” of an ethical-social communal form of life that, in the limit, ensures the smooth possibility of the mutual recognition of any subject (in particular, the recognition of the “intelligibility” of their actions and motivations) by any other.¹³ The demand of achieving the conditions of such recognition then also motivates the project of completing or maintaining the existing institutions of social or collective life which protect and enforce it.

On the other, leftist side, Slavoj Žižek has suggested that the hope for the transformative achievement of an emancipatory universality

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11 For this position, see, e.g., Pippin (2008), especially chapters 1, 3, and 4.

12 Pippin (2008), p. 5.

13 Pippin (2008), pp. 240-241.

can be sustained, not by the idea of such a collective form of mutual recognition or protecting the institutions that consolidate it, but rather by discerning and mobilizing an obscure radical core of traditional theology itself.¹⁴ The thought here is that the Christian tradition specifically, in its conception of the role of the “concrete universal” and in its founding notion of the sacrifice of God, contains a “perverse kernel” which could be exploited to produce a kind of inversion leading to a new and emancipatory universalism.¹⁵ From this perspective, what is needed to supplement the individualist Kantian moral demand is thus not a principle of collectivity or mutual recognition, but rather the hope, fascinated by the Christian inversion, supposedly concealed within the possibility of a transformative repetition of the sacrificial founding, or of the manifestation of the absolute in the concrete that it represents.¹⁶

Both positions can be evaluated in terms of the specific conceptions they imply of the critical power of thought, or (just as much) rather the specific weakness they ascribe to it. In the one case, the power of thought is constrained within the general form of identity that ensures the possibility of recognition, so that thought can only work to confirm or consolidate the institutions that protect and preserve this mutual recognition. In the other, the affirmative power of thought is limited to its being the mechanism of a repetition of the inversion already at the center of Christian theology in its traditional forms, an effect in the light of which any novel effect or creative performance of thought will always appear weak and secondary. Both positions thus measure the power of thought only by means of their constitutive appeal to what is formally a superior, onto-theologically thought infinite absolute, and both leave the power of thought in a desultory or limited state with respect to it. In their dependence, in different forms, on the re-inscription of the infinite absolute at the programmatic center of the critical or transformative projects they entail, neither one approaches the two-step movement of affirmative thought and empowered life which is the dynamic form of strong critique.

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14 See especially Žižek (2003).

15 Žižek (2003), p. 6.

16 Žižek (2003), p. 88. For an attempt – which seems to me unsuccessful – to draw on this idea of the “perverse core” in order partially to reconcile Hegel and Deleuze within the project of a “radical” theology predicated on the idea of a “weak” divine power, see Caputo (2011).

Second Criterion: Paradoxical and Contradictory

When a figure of critique grants to thought the power to pass to the limit of what it can do, it already essentially propounds paradoxes of a specific sort. These are paradoxes of the *limit* or *totality*, whereby the thought of the totality of the thinkable already engenders a position that is simultaneously and formally both within and without it. The problem here is not just the familiar one that “to draw a boundary in thought or language is already to go beyond it.” More deeply, it is that the constitutive ideas of a totality reflexively thinkable from a position within it already irreducibly produce the structure of in-closure, or of contradiction at the limits.¹⁷ The structure is paradigmatically exhibited by Russell’s paradox of the set of all sets that are not members of themselves. But it has also always been inscribed formally within the critique of reason itself, as is shown by the essential critical role of the Kantian cosmological antinomies and their own formal homologues to the Russell set. Nevertheless the affirmation of a strong power of thought in relation to paradoxes of the limit cannot be formulated by way of the subsequent Russelian or Kantian *limitative* devices that function, once paradox appears, to salvage consistency once more by recapturing it within a limited and regulated realm. Neither a Russelian parameterization of types, nor the idealist delimitation of the phenomenal from the noumenal, permits the ultimate consequences of the paradoxes of limits and totality to be drawn out. Neither, accordingly, can elicit their formal and structural consequences for a critical thought of the constitutive problems of the whole. What is needed to develop these consequences, allowing thought to go to the limit and here encounter its specific “beyond,” is rather the affirmation of the original structure of limit-paradox as the really indicative instance of a third basic orientation of thought, what I have called the *paradoxico-critical orientation*. With this orientation, the activity of thought does not cede to the regulation of consistency from an assumed higher perspective or its limitative maintenance within a “merely regulative” employment. Rather, paradox and the irreducibility of its structure are affirmed as the resource of a strengthened and rigorous critical *praxis*, one that liberates the faculties from their transcendental delimitation and unlocks their capacity to deploy their powers at and beyond every legislated and instituted limit.

This is the basis of a critique, resting in the form of the paradoxes

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17 For the theory and formalism of in-closure, see Priest (2002).

of the whole, that is thereby para-doxical, in an eminent sense, in providing the structural basis for any possibility of contesting and overturning the *doxa* that reflects the form of the contradictory whole only in a partial, distorted, or “ideological” way. As such, it is also the basis of a form of critical thought that is singularly “appropriate” to the contradictions of global capitalism and capable of responding to them on their own level of definition, promulgation and rationalization. If these structures always rest on a determinate mobilization of the powers of the total, what is most essential is not to locate a simple, foundational outside or “other” simply exterior to global capital (there is no such), but to see how the “totalizing” force of global capital always already implies constitutive paradox and structural contradiction, and inscribes it within the forms of contemporary life. Here, the significance of paradox is, as Deleuze suggests, finally that its analysis allows us to be “present at the genesis of contradiction” and thereby to witness its real and original structural condition.¹⁸

This is also how we should understand the contemporary relevance of the Althusserian idea of overdetermination, which refers the actual antagonisms characteristic of a given situation back to their structurally determining moment of complex contradiction rather than (as with Hegel) to the always again internalized “dialectical” opposition of given substantive concepts.¹⁹ This does not mean that there is always just one contradiction which takes up all the rest, but rather that the various antagonisms are located on the level of their real *structural* -- which is to say “total” -- determination.²⁰ The paradoxes of the whole are here specifically related to the *doxa* that reflects the totality on the “ideological” level of denegation or false reflection. Hence Althusser:

In ideology men do express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but *the way* they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an ‘*imaginary*’, ‘*lived*’ relation. Ideology, then, is the expression of the relation between men and their ‘world’, that is, the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation

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18 Deleuze (1968), p. 74; compare ‘How do we recognize structuralism?’ (Deleuze 1967), pp. 190-191: “Let us again consider the analyses of Althusser and his collaborators: on the one hand, they show in the economic order how the adventures of the empty square (Value as object =x) are marked by the goods, money, the fetish, capital, etc., that characterize the capitalist structure. On the other hand, they show how contradictions are thus born in the structure.”

19 Cf. Althusser (1962), pp. 100-102.

20 Althusser (1964), pp. 231-32.

between them and their real conditions of existence.²¹

The ideology which each structured situation inherently produces out of itself is not, thus, to be understood simply as an imaginary or secondary production emergent from the “real” and concrete economic or base relations. Rather, it results from the real order of underlying conditions only insofar as the third order of the symbolic produces the structural condition of excess by which this real is invariably overlain in imaginary forms. If ideology is thus “as such an organic part of every social totality,” then its continued and renewed critique requires that the “real conditions” themselves can only be understood in the structural foundations of their inherent presentation of themselves in terms of the more or less mystified self-reflection of the whole. The characteristic form of this mystification is the production of the *consistency* of the imaginary instance: the inscription of the assumption of a total functioning of the system, or its positive motivation or efficacy, as both complete and consistent in itself. Against this, paradoxico-criticism or strong critique demonstrates the formal and necessary inherence of the paradoxes of the whole in the structure of every “functioning” total system as such, thus evincing the real-structural ultimate condition for both the system itself and its ideological reduplication.

Since the symbolic is a properly infinite dimension, the recognition of an inherent relation of the critical thought of totality to the paradoxes of the linguistic order requires a critical thought of the consequences of the infinite, one which in particular develops the implications of a contemporary -- that is, post-Cantorian -- thinking of its structure. In *Being and Event*, Badiou's development of a meta-philosophical reflection on the spontaneous ontology of Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory allows him clearly and unequivocally to reject all forms of the critical analytic of finitude, as well as, in an equally basic gesture, the onto-theological founding assumption of a total and consistent infinite-absolute.²² In the political case, the dual rejection produces the condition under which Badiou can consider individual structured situations as potential sites for the transformative eruption of an event and the subsequent work, itself actually infinite, which consists in the subject's faithful tracing of the situational consequences following from the pronouncement of its name.

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21 Althusser (1964), pp. 233-34.

22 Badiou (1988).

Badiou is here infinitely more trenchant than are the modern apologists of *Sittlichkeit* when he recognizes, applying classical Marxist categories, that the foundation of the social whole in the form of the State is never the positive principle of a fusional or reciprocal social bond, but rather a function of the prohibition of un-binding: the prohibition, specifically, of the inherent excess which produces the structural “danger” of the appearance of inconsistency itself.²³ And Badiou is again similarly consequent in insisting upon the way in which the Cantorian event renders inaccessible the traditional infinite-absolute, and with it the whole range of onto-theological consequences that have been drawn from it. With Cantor’s conception, the concept of the infinite is, by contrast, irreducibly multiplied, for it is no longer possible consistently to think “the” infinite, once and for all, as a singular absolute, but rather only as an endless plurality of ever-increasing transfinite levels, the proper “vertigo of an infinity of infinities distinguishable within their common opposition to the finite.”²⁴

Does Badiou, then, indeed succeed in indicating the orientation of a strong critical thought equal to the problems of contemporary global capitalism? In fact, there are many indications that he does not. The most basic of these is the status of the One (or the One-All) itself for Badiou. Early on in *Being and Event*, Badiou declares as a founding axiomatic decision the position that the “One is not” – that is, there is no total universe of all multiplicities, no “One” that gathers together everything that is. Although the claim is presented as a basic and axiomatic decision, Badiou nevertheless argues positively for it on the basis of Russell’s paradox and Cantor’s method of diagonalization.

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23 Badiou (1988), p. 109.

24 Badiou (1988), p. 146. Badiou does not hesitate to draw the conclusion this implies with respect to the Hegelian “absolute” itself and its motivating basis, in Hegel’s system, in the passage from the “bad” to the “good” infinite: Hegel’s derivation of the “good” infinite is from the post-Cantorian picture a kind of “trick”, an “illusory scene of the speculative theatre.” In particular, the passage by which the bad quantitative infinity passes over into the determination of its qualitative character, and thereby produces a “good” quantitative infinity which, as being the “quality of quantity” is itself also, for Hegel, the “good” qualitative one that is associated with the Absolute, must be rejected from a post-Cantorian perspective. The reason is that the quantitative infinite itself, ultimately grounded as it is in the “difference between the same and the same” which results from the iteration of the sign, cannot, as Cantor’s open hierarchy of transfinite numbers effectively shows, ever be recaptured into the unity of a single or simple concept. Badiou draws the critical implications of this, right up to the in-consistency of God: The ‘good quantitative infinity’ is a properly Hegelian hallucination. It was on the basis of a completely different psychosis, in which God in-consists, that Cantor had to extract the means for legitimately naming the infinite multiplicities – at the price, however, of transferring to them the very proliferation that Hegel imagined one could reduce (it being bad) through the artifice of its differentiable indifference. (p. 170)

These results show, on Badiou’s reading, that, on pain of inconsistency, a set of all sets, or a totality of all that is, cannot be ontologically presented, and so it is necessary to adopt the axiomatic devices which prevent any such presentation according to standard set theory within ontology itself.²⁵ On this picture, ontology, or the theory of being insofar as it can be presented or said, thus limits itself to the presentation of always partial and incomplete situations, whereas being “in itself” or independent of its presentation is understood as “pure inconsistent multiplicity.”²⁶ Although this surrounding inconsistency cannot, for Badiou, ever be directly presented as such, it is nevertheless the exterior basis for the possibility of transformation which shows up, in a local way, with the event – namely the possibility of a kind of punctual and ephemeral appearance, erased as soon as it appears, of the “proper” inconsistency of a situation in the form of its own void element, what is structurally “prohibited” in the existing situation itself.

From the perspective of a strong critique grounded in the structural consequences of limit-paradox as such, what this misses, though, is the way in which the ZF set theory that Badiou considers to capture the structure of ontology is *itself* positively founded on the prohibition of an inconsistency – this time, the inconsistency of the Russell set or of the set of all sets, the One-All. One can argue, as Badiou does, that the Russell paradox metalogically or metaformally demands the unpresentability of the One-All and the consequent axiomatic restriction of the powers of language or formalism to preclude the “formation” or “counting together” of the set of all sets (or any number of equivalently “too large” sets). But the conclusion follows only on the assumption that inconsistency is *as such* unpresentable – that, as Badiou says, presentation is itself committed to the “the most rigid of all conceivable laws”, that of formal, deductive consistency.²⁷ But if there is a type of critique that formulates the structure of limit-paradoxes in order to meet the contradictions characteristic of a situation on the level of their real underlying structure, Badiou’s assumptions about consistency, presentation, and the One thus render it unavailable.²⁸

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25 Badiou (2005), pp. 42-43.

26 Badiou (1988), p. 25.

27 Badiou (1988), p. 27.

28 More broadly, Badiou’s handling of critique generally is itself symptomatic here. In *Being and*

In the opening pages of *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou verifies the consequences of this for the position of the transformative subject. Challenging what he sees as the “contemporary axiomatic” of what he calls democratic materialism, which is formulated as the widespread and pervasive assumption that “there are only bodies and languages,” Badiou insists upon the alternative principle of what he calls, resurrecting Althusser’s term for his own “theory of theoretical practice,” a “materialist dialectic” whose principle is, by contrast, “there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths.”²⁹

Though Badiou thus retains Althusser’s terminology, what he thereby designates by it retains little or nothing of the specific sense of intra-situational structural contradiction essential to Althusser’s own “dialectical” approach. By contrast with such a principle of change inherent to the situation itself and to be discerned in its structural contradictions, Badiou appeals to the “exceptional” existence of truths

Event and *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou often presents his own “generic” and “subtractive” orientation as structurally sufficient to exclude critical philosophy in *all* of its forms – not only the classical Kantian one but also those, “from the Greek Sophists to the Anglo-Saxon logical empiricists (even to Foucault),” who have proposed a constructivist or nominalist critical measuring of being on behalf of a delimitative regulation of language and meaning. (p. 288). In *Being and Event*, this exclusion is formally underwritten by a reflection on the implications of Gödel’s development of a so-called *constructivist* universe, one in which positive being is limited to what can be constructively designated in terms of an existing language of a regular type. These preconditions of existence in the constructivist universe are sufficient to guarantee that within it, Cantor’s continuum hypothesis holds in its general form and, as a result, the entire procedure of “forcing” the production of a generic set, on which Badiou’s model of the fidelity of the evental subject relies, is there impossible. This verifies for Badiou that the event and its subjective fidelity are in a structural sense ruled out by constructivism – that, in other words, the constructivist “control of being” by means of linguistic protocols and syntactic structures capable of drawing and enforcing a critical line between what is sayable and what is not structurally excludes any possibility of radical and transformative change in the existing situation. If, then, we want to think or develop the principle of such a change, we must abandon the constructivist regimentation and (Badiou assumes) along with, any critical philosophy grounded in linguistic reflection at all. What is essential formally to note here, though, is that Gödel’s constructivist universe controls the construction of sets in the regimented way that it does only on the assumption of the *predicativity* of the underlying language. That is, in the constructivist universe, existence is indeed regimented by means of the existing language, but only on the assumption that, in this language, reflexivity or impredicativity is excluded in advance. On the other hand, ordinary language is plausibly massively impredicative, and in such a way as to inscribe reflexivity inherently in the context of its most important phenomena of meaning, truth, and structural authority. If this impredicativity is indeed essential, then Gödel’s model of constructivism is not decisive in assaying the possibilities of a critical philosophy based in the structure of language, and another form of linguistic critique, this time based not on the regimented maintenance of linguistic strictures but rather on the positive development of paradox, comes into view. (I develop this critique of Badiou in more detail in my (2012), especially chapters 1 and 9.)

29 Althusser 1963, pp. 171-72; Badiou 2006, pp. 1-4. Notably, Badiou says here (p. 7) that Deleuze, as a “free and fervent advocate of [the] affirmation of the infinite rights of thought” also “embodied one of the orientations of the materialist dialectic,” different from Badiou’s but united with it in their shared resistance to “democratic materialism”.

that can be partially realized in specific historical situations by means of a subject’s intervention in the name of an event. These successive interventions each mobilize partially the implications of a structurally superior truth, itself to be seen, in the long traverse of its successive historical unfolding, as an eternal existence situated outside any specific historical situation.

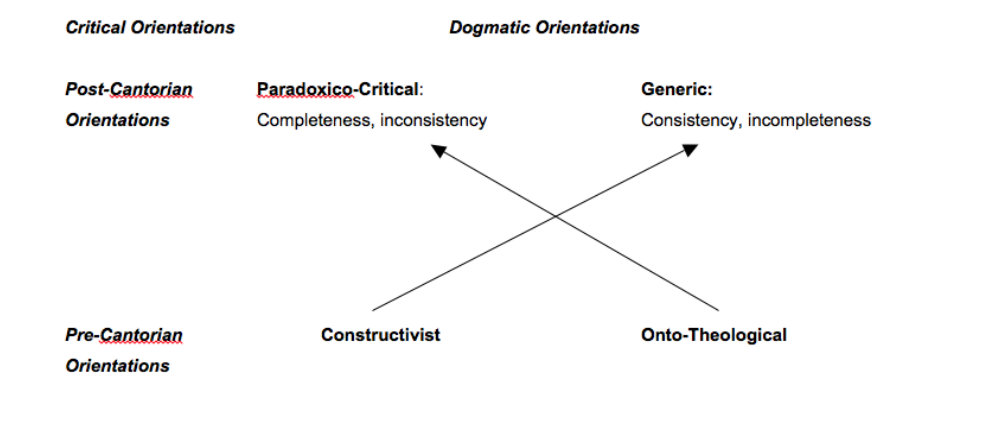
Instead of pointing to the inherence of contradiction, Badiou’s approach thus suspends the possibility of change from the traversing inherence of the plurality of extra-situational truths. The power of thought itself in creating or effecting the conditions of change is thereby rendered secondary, oscillating between the intra-situational unthinkability of the situation’s proper void point and the imperative that nevertheless renders it formally thinkable, but only as the infinite outcome of a generic procedure. The thought of the individual or collective subject, formally determined by the very structure of the event and the truth it depends on, can only accordingly perform its transformative role by way of a prior “fidelity” to the event’s name or (equivalently) its passive agency in facilitating an operation of “grace” which amounts to the advent of the impossible-transcendent in being itself.

With the identification of this structure of Badiou’s “generic” orientation, we can now complete the graph of the four orientations of thought (figure 1).³⁰ They are discernible according to strength they accord to thought in meeting being in itself, and for this reason, each one can be indicated briefly in terms of the specific figure of the infinite it proposes, and in relation to which it measures the power of thought in relation to existing situations and structures. First, the *onto-theological* orientation understands the infinite as the absolute: complete in itself and having no exterior, the absolute performs a grounding of being in the divine which is as such forever inaccessible to simply finite thought. Second, there is the *constructivist* orientation, where the infinite is thought as merely potential or only regulative with respect to the limitative forms that ensure consistent finitude. Beyond these, the Cantorian discovery of the transfinite points to two further orientations, each grounded in this discovery, although in different and opposed ways. Badiou’s *generic* orientation, as we have seen, inscribes the action of the subject and the possibility of situational change within

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30 The four orientations are developed in greater detail in Livingston 2012, especially pp. 51-60 and pp. 248-54.

the vast open hierarchy of the transfinite, maintaining presentational consistency there, however, at the cost of sacrificing the One-All. Finally, though, there is the further orientation that Badiou himself does not generally recognize, namely the *paradoxico-critical* orientation which mobilizes the power of paradox as the structural outcome of the consideration of totality itself.

Of the four, only the constructivist and paradoxico-critical orientations are, in proposing principled internal bases for overcoming the limits of particular situations, genuinely *critical* at all. And because of the way it grounds itself in the formal/structural situation of thought itself in relation to the totality of the thinkable, only paradoxico-criticism is capable of fully affirming a *strong* power of thought whose reflexivity is not modified or delimited by means of any external mandate, even that of consistency. It is an affirmative and mobile position, moving at once all the way to the end to grasp and directly intervene in the whole, and thereby unfolding the consequences of the inherent paradoxicality of its constitution to perform the immediate production of the labor of thought in delivering, there, the new.



Third Criterion: Realist, Atheist, Anti-Humanist

If critique is to capable of meeting the problems of the contemporary situation, its principle and schema must themselves be *realist*: formally based, that is, on the situational inherence of the real points of paradox which, although void, nevertheless organize its structure and the provision of its sense. It is thus necessary for strong critique, breaking with idealism and constructivism, to found itself in the structural principle of a *formal realism* indicated on the level of the ultimate provision of intra-situational sense. The best and most

comprehensive schematism of this realism is the one suggested by Michael Dummett in his penetrating discussions of the formulation and consequences of realism and anti-realism generally.³¹ It is that of compliance with the law of the excluded middle, so that every claim is understood as *either* true *or* false (or indeed, since it is the law of the excluded middle and *not* that of noncontradiction that is invoked here, perhaps both). This compliance in the case of a particular domain of sentences suffices formally to disjoin the meaningfulness of sentences in that domain from any epistemic or procedural or epistemic criterion, or any attempt to found meaning in the constitutive activity of any subject or agent. Thereby it can discern the real points at which sense is produced, maintained, and can be transformed.

In the course of his twentieth seminar, Jacques Lacan indicates the positive usefulness for psychoanalytic theorizing of mathematical/ logical formalisms, contrasting it sharply with the structural idea underlying Hegel’s discourse (which is rather, he says, “a plenitude of contrasts dialecticized in the idea of an historical progression, which, it must be said, nothing substantiates for us...”).³² The development of a rigorous formalism is, in particular, indispensable according to Lacan in that it “is the most advanced elaboration we have by which to produce signifierness,” or the bare character of transmissible signification as such, prior to and independent of any externally given meaning.³³ Indeed, Lacan suggests, such a “formalization of signifierness” as occurs in mathematical formalism even runs “counter to meaning,” almost producing itself as a kind of nonsense or counter-sense (*contresens*) nevertheless inherent to the real production of sense itself. According to Lacan, the usefulness of a pure formalism is thus the way it allows symbolism to pass to the limit of its meaning and make visible the insistence, beneath it, of the real. For while “the real can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization,” it is nevertheless possible (indeed for this very reason) to see in the provision of formalism and its tracing of its own formal limits the possibility of a “model” of the real itself.³⁴ Here, the purity of a formal/symbolic writing

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31 See, e.g., Dummett 1963. I have developed the argument here in more detail in Livingston 2013. Cf. also Livingston 2012, p. 291.

32 Lacan 1973, p. 93.

33 Lacan 1973, p. 93.

34 Lacan 1973, p. 93.

that “goes beyond speech, without going beyond language’s actual effects” is, in particular, the key to the positive visibility of those “limits, impasses, and dead ends that show the real acceding to the symbolic.”³⁵

Turning as it does on the inscription of the structure of paradox whereby noncontradictory formalization itself reaches its specific limit, paradoxico-criticism (or strong critique) develops this suggestion of the use of formalism as a specifically realist position, indeed what can be called a kind of “realism” of the (Lacanian) real. What is decisive here is the way in which formalism itself provides, when pushed to its limits, the basis for a formal indication of the structure of these limits themselves, one which owes nothing to any previous specific principle or criterion of sense, meaning, or signification. If, as Lacan says, it is in this showing of the limits, moreover, that the real accedes to presentation, the only kind of presentation it can have, then a critique capable of accessing the real must itself depend on drawing out the resource of formalism and its own inherent capacity to reflect on its limits. The ultimate significance of this realism of the transit of forms, or of the traversal of the empty signifier as the principle of sense, is that, going all the way to the point of structural paradox, it there unfolds the real itself the only possible presentation by which it can be rendered accessible to thought.

It is in connection with this realist principle that we should understand the political implications of the “paradoxical element” or “empty square” which Deleuze, drawing on Levi-Strauss’s “floating signifier” and Lacan’s formalization of the “barred” subject as a void place within structure, makes the basis of the positive production of linguistic or structural sense. The paradoxical element is the empty position, in a structure determined by two series as signifiers and signifieds, at which the two series are put into communication and made to resonate. “At once word and thing,” the paradoxical element is a name that is, in saying its own sense, “completely abnormal” and therefore nonsense according to the laws that normally regulate the distinction between sense and nonsense.³⁶ Nevertheless, in indicating the point of paradox which every structure, as dispensing of a totality of signification, bears within itself, it evinces the more basic and mutually implicative relationship of sense and nonsense in which systemic

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35 Lacan 1973, p. 93.

36 Deleuze 1969, p. 67.

contradiction and dynamism is founded.³⁷ It is here, in particular, that one can discern the original structural basis for the production of sense, and thereby the principle, as Deleuze says, of structural transformation: the displacement of frontiers and the animating basis of “permanent revolution.”³⁸

The recognition of the real and necessary structural inherence of the paradox suffices to overcome any politics, whether of a “transcendent” or “immanent” form, that finds in the human or the divine an ultimate reserve of sense in order to propose a politics of its coherence. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze considers those modern and recent approaches which either ground sense in “a new transcendence, a new avatar of God and a transformed heaven” or, alternatively, locate its basis in “man and his abyss, a newly excavated depth and underground.”³⁹ But what renders the whole previous discussion of sense as “Principle, Reservoir, Reserve,” or “Origin” untenable today is the “pleasing...news” that “sense is never a principle or an origin, but that it is produced:” generated, in particular, by structure in its imposition of a “pure counter-sense” which imbricates sense and thereby forms the basis of its concrete structural genesis.⁴⁰

Deleuze’s indication here of a structural origin of sense, not in the depths or the heights but on the surface, in the inherency of counter-sense and the structural effects it produces, is as relevant today as it was when he wrote in 1969. For there are now, as then, no shortage of attempts to ground critique and political projects in a humanist piety or a resurrected theology. From the perspective of the affirmation of thought, all of these attempts fall short, since they all demote the power of critical thought to a secondary status, subjecting it instead to the agency of a divine or human principle conceived as operating in the first place to set its imperatives and ends. By contrast with these, in affirming the power of thought all the way up to the structural paradox of the real, strong critique operates to discern the place of the empty square, and thus to orient a *praxis* with respect to the real that appears, uniquely, there. As Deleuze suggests, in this progression to the real that appears as the paradoxical instance itself lies the concrete basis,

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37 Deleuze 1969, pp. 48-49.

38 Deleuze 1969, p. 49.

39 Deleuze 1969, pp. 71-72.

40 Deleuze 1969, p. 72.

beyond humanism and theism, for a politics of the future:

It suffices that we dissipate ourselves a little, that we be able to be at the surface, that we stretch our skin like a drum, in order that the 'great politics' begin. An empty square for neither man nor God; singularities which are neither general nor individual, neither personal nor universal. All of this is traversed by circulations, echoes, and events which produce more sense, more freedom, and more strength than man has ever dreamed of, or God ever conceived.⁴¹

Fourth Criterion: A-subjective

If a strong politics can affirm the power of thought, in itself, with respect to the real of being whose indication is the fixed point of structural transformation, it does not do so by appealing to the action of a subject, its consciousness, or its self-formation in general. The basic reason why a politics grounded in subjective action or "subject formation" cannot serve a thought that goes all the way to the structural-paradoxical inherence of the real is the one already indicated by Deleuze in "How do We Recognize Structuralism?" It is that the primary opposition of subject and object constrains the politics of the subject to the redoubling of the real characteristic of its *imaginary* and *representational* relations, thereby missing the structural-transformative significance of the third register of the symbolic. Because of the way it thus moves within the order of representative redoubling, the politics of the subject cannot do more, on the level of its practical appeal, than invoke an imperative ultimately grounded in the deficiencies of the existing situation as their reverse and shadow. This is already the case when, with Kant, practical philosophy determines the imperative of action as the conformity of subjective motivation with the appeal of a transcendent-universal law whose effectiveness can nevertheless never be finally verified, over against pathological motivations. But it remains equally the case when the subject's effectiveness in relation to the world of objects is submitted to the infinite dialectic of self-recognition (as in Hegel), the local unfolding of a truth by means of the immanent pursuit of its generic procedure (Badiou), or even just its constitution as a "parallax gap" between incommensurable perspectives on the whole (as in Žižek).⁴² By contrast with all of these, only a principle of critique that

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41 Deleuze 1969, pp. 72-73.

42 This is not to say that Žižek does not (indeed quite often) gesture toward something like the paradoxico-critical orientation, particularly in his many formulations of the idea of an essential

passes through the properly structuralist moment of properly *symbolic* paradox can also be the positive principle of the active structural production of sense.

In a 2007 interview with Tzuchien Tho, Alain Badiou recalls how his earliest works maintained, under an Althusserian inspiration, the thesis of the inherent opposition of formalism to subjectivity, and hence the necessary exclusion of the subject from the field of formalizable transformations.⁴³ At this early stage, Badiou says, he saw in the mathematical itself, in particular, the rigor of "the non-subjective, the making possible of a capacity to think outside all intentionality and subjectivity."⁴⁴ But it was, according to Badiou, necessary to rethink this when he saw the necessity to "take and maintain some aspects of subjectivity in the elements of formalism itself"; for even if it is not necessary thereby to reinsert intentionality or consciousness, "every philosophy that eliminates the category of the subject becomes unable to serve a political process."⁴⁵ This conclusion led Badiou, starting with *Theory of the Subject*, to attempt a formalization of the subject as the point of the effective development of the consequences of the event in a particular situational context. Nevertheless, according to Badiou, this conception of subjectivity, further developed in *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds* retains "the idea that the relation between the subject and formalism is on the side of formalism and not on the side of the subject," treating the subject only as it is defined by the "new process of formalization" that occurs "where there is an effect of puncture in the particular underlying structure."⁴⁶

As we have seen, Badiou's appeal to the force of formalization

"gap", "cut", "incompleteness" or "inconsistency" in the real arising from the dissymmetry or mismatch of the One with itself. However, because Badiou does not generally distinguish with respect to this structure between incompleteness and inconsistency, he does not generally present the paradoxico-critical orientation in a form clear enough to distinguish it from (Badiou's) generic orientation, or indeed (especially given his own commitments to Hegel) from the Hegelian combination of constructivism and onto-theology. See Livingston 2012, pp. 300-301 and pp. 328-329. It should also be noted that on the penultimate and last pages of his massive recently published *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Žižek 2012, pp. 1009-1010), Žižek gestures toward the possibility that "'postmodern capitalism'" as an "increasingly paraconsistent system" must be treated in terms of a paraconsistent or dialetheic logic that affirms the truth of contradictions – essentially the paradoxico-critical orientation.

43 Badiou 2007, p. 88.

44 Badiou 2007, p. 88.

45 Badiou 2007, p. 88.

46 Badiou 2007, pp. 88-89.

represents in exemplary fashion one way of drawing the implications of an the infinite power of formal thought to go to its own limit and indicate the point of its own inherent impasse, thereby indicating the ultimately determining formal features of political situations and activities. The essential point to make from the position of paradoxico-criticism, though, is just that there are other ways of thinking the relationship between the formal impasses and political transformation than the one Badiou suggests here. In particular, if the critical points of a given situation are to be thought, along paradoxico-critical lines, as the structural points of contradiction and antagonism marking the situation itself in its contradictory totality, then they do not in the first instance depend on or suggest the structural inscription of a broader “process”, which then could only be the prerogative of a situationally constituted (or eventually dependent) subject to carry out. It is rather, from this perspective, to be asked what structural dynamisms can be unlocked, what new permutations or developments of difference can be carried out, on the basis of an agency which need not be subjective at all but whose possibility rather results from the formal dynamics constitutive of the larger situation itself.

In contemporary leftist discussions which presuppose the necessity of subjective agency for political transformation, the imperative of finding a subjective position from which this agency can effectively operate often yields a marked sense of disappointment. In the wake of the historical failures of Marxism and the contemporary global dominance of regimes determined by the rule of capital, the imperative becomes that of realizing a motive for action in the figure of a reinscribed eschatological hope or a “realistically” adjusted messianism. The aim of a rhetoric of activism or its political appeal is then determined as that of overcoming “motivational deficit” or producing an appropriate “confidence” capable of realizing the “radical” or “emancipatory” project that is actually already in view, at least implicitly.⁴⁷ Posed this way, the problem is not so much creatively to think new social forms or modes of organization, but (much more) to motivate activity leading to the change that one already anticipates or desires. Here, critical thought is once again structurally weak: subordinated to the overarching imperative of political ends already

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⁴⁷ This suggestion is at least implicit in the preface of Adrian Johnston's (excellent) 2009 book *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Johnston, 2009). For the language of the “motivational deficit”, see, e.g. Critchley 2007, pp. 7-8.

assumed, it can only have, with respect to the existing situation, the residual function of reassuring a necessarily marginal hope for its eventual transformation.

What this configuration overlooks, however, is the active production of sense, which is not the “hope” for another or different situation but (since there is no separation, here, between the thought of change and the imperative that activates it) the direct transformation of the existing situation by way of creative intervention at its critical points. Here, the two-step unity of which Deleuze speaks between thought and life is immediately the basis both for the thought of new possibilities of life and their positive actualization. For the demonstration carried out by strong (or paradoxico-) critique shows how these inhere in the virtuality and dynamism of the existing structure itself, and thus already provide the sufficient conditions for its transformation.

Fifth Criterion: Undecidable

When paradoxico-criticism locates the fixed points of paradox at which any system which aspires to totality and contains the resources of its own internal reflection inscribes limit-contradictions, it already indicates the contradictory space in which every such system finds the ultimate formal basis for its own positive constitution. The articulation of this original space – in which sense and nonsense interpenetrate and communicate – already points to a more original basis of the positive consistency of situations in an original ungrounding. This is why, when Gödel in 1931 recapitulates Russell's paradox in a different form with his incompleteness theorems, he thereby indicated not only the incompleteness of specific axiomatic systems with respect to what can be seen as truths beyond their ability to prove, but also, more basically, the undecidability that, by its own formal evidence, undermines any claim to determine truth itself completely in univocal, methodical, or axiomatic fashion. Contemporary discourses in a paradoxico-critical mold, most of all Derrida's deconstruction, have mobilized the phenomenon of undecidability as an essential resource of textual interpretation. But what has sometimes been lost here is the formal connection between the undecidable as a structural basis of linguistic meaning and the radical implications of this structure the constitution of communities and structures of political authority.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ For a treatment of the connection between the undecidable in Gödel's sense and the undecidable in Derrida's sense, see Livingston 2010.

In his 1990 homage to Derrida, *Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality*, Giorgio Agamben points to the practical significance of this twofold connection of undecidability to formalism and political *praxis*:

The concept “trace” is not a concept (just as “the name ‘différance’ is not a name”): this is the paradoxical thesis that is already implicit in the grammatological project and that defines the proper status of Derrida’s terminology. Grammatology was forced to become deconstruction in order to avoid this paradox (or, more precisely, to seek to dwell in it correctly); this is why it renounced any attempt to proceed by decisions about meaning. But in its original intention, grammatology is not a theory of polysemy or a doctrine of the transcendence of meaning; it has as its object not an equally inexhaustible, infinite hermeneutics of signification but a radicalization of the problem of self-reference that calls into question and transforms the very concept of meaning grounding Western logic . . .

It does not suffice, however, to underline (on the basis of Gödel’s theorem) the necessary relation between a determinate axiomatics and undecidable propositions: what is decisive is solely how one conceives this relation. It is possible to consider an undecidable as a purely negative *limit* (Kant’s *Schranke*), such that one then invokes strategies (Bertrand Russell’s theory of types or Alfred Tarski’s metalanguage) to avoid running up against it. Or one can consider it as a *threshold* (Kant’s *Grenze*), which opens onto an exteriority and transforms and dislocates all the elements of the system.⁴⁹

In particular, if, as Agamben argues elsewhere, every constituted political or juridical order must be seen as instituted by means of an act of founding constitution which is structurally exceptional with respect to that order itself, then the structure of sovereignty already itself inscribes a more basic structural undecidability in every such order.⁵⁰ In response to the threat this poses to the “normative” functioning of constituted regimes, one can, following the strategy of Carl Schmitt, reactively reaffirm the structural necessity for an absolute constituting power capable of deciding the systemically undecidable, thereby also (as Agamben suggests) authorizing the promulgation and regularization of “states of exception” in which force and legitimacy ultimately overlap

49 Agamben 1990, pp. 213-214.

50 See, e.g., Agamben 2005.

to the point of their mutual indiscernibility. Or one can, by contrast, affirm the original and constitutive structure of the undecidable itself and seek to orient a political *praxis* on its basis. This is the principle of a paradoxical “community to come” which institutes, like a paradoxical Cantorian set, the foundational inconsistency of the origin.⁵¹

Although this *praxis* thus depends essentially on the undecidable, is nevertheless not one of indefinite hesitation before decision, or of an unlimited textualism lacking any possible “passage” to the act. Rather, the affirmation of the original structure of the undecidable is already in itself the “decisive” act, since it already implies, as Agamben says, the *arche* of a transformed life. Its possibility depends crucially on the development and affirmation of the structure of linguistic or symbolic sense in its original relation to paradox, but it does not thereby turn on the contingent features of specific languages or communities. Rather it unfolds the consequences of the original structure of paradox and the problematic it inscribes as the primary universal, or as the very structure of the universal as such.

It is in this way, as well, that we should understand the contemporary critical-political implications of Deleuze’s insistence on the priority and objectivity of *problems* in relation to their specifically determined solutions. It is routinely objected, against the Derridean or Deleuzian emphasis on the primacy of difference, that such a conception is all too easily accommodated or appropriated by the narcissistic multicultural logic of contemporary global capitalism. Within this logic, we can all easily and comfortably represent different cultures, languages, “situated” practices, etc., as long as none of these local differences rise to the level of threatening the abstract total order of global capital itself. Some recent applications of Deleuzian terminology, or projects marching under their banner, have indeed seemed to confirm this impression. But early in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze anticipates exactly this danger and indicates how it is overcome on the basis of an insistence upon the priority and positivity of the problem:

There are certainly many dangers in invoking pure differences which have become independent of the negative and liberated from the identical. The greatest danger is that of lapsing into the representations

51 Cf. Agamben 2000, p. 89, where he describes a coming “community without either presuppositions or conditions of belonging” as having the structure of an inconsistent Cantorian set.

of a beautiful soul: there are only reconcilable and federative differences, far removed from bloody struggles. The beautiful soul says: we are different, but not opposed ... *The notion of a problem*, which we see linked to that of difference, also seems to nurture the sentiments of the beautiful soul: only problems and questions matter Nevertheless, we believe that when these problems attain their proper degree of *positivity*, and when difference becomes the object of a corresponding *affirmation*, they release a power of aggression and selection which destroys the beautiful soul by depriving it of its very identity and breaking its good will.⁵²

This positivity of the problem, prior to its determined solutions in specific situations, is the form of a power of thought that allows it to contest and criticize every situational principle that seeks to assure the reconcilability of differences within a determined order of identity or correspondence. The significance of this for the contemporary “total” and global regime of capital is clear: that despite the palliative assurances of ultimate commensurability it provides, there remain insistent problems of life that it does not and cannot solve and which, if grasped in their underlying logic, could themselves provide the basis for other structural solutions. The formal principle of this insistence of the problem and its refusal to be exhausted within any single determined structure (and even and especially “total” ones), however, is the inherent undecidability of any total situation which traces to the fundamental basis of its institution. Its affirmation is thus the overturning of the organizing structures of all unitary solutions that reinscribe consistent decidability, the active and “aggressive” power of critical thought of which Deleuze speaks.

Sixth Criterion: Ineffective

I have argued for a strong power of thought in critique, one according to which thought is not separated from what it can do but is able to go all the way with respect to the total situation, to pass to the very limit of formalism in which it inscribes the real. This affirmation of the critical power of thought is sufficient to overcome what Deleuze calls “good sense” and “common sense:” the good sense that seeks to assure the consensus of thinkers with respect to the objectivity of a common world and the common sense that seeks to guarantee the internal unity of

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⁵² Deleuze 1968, p. xx.

the faculties before a recognizable identical object.⁵³ The affirmation of a strong power of thought thus unsettles each of the determined configurations in which such an image of thought presupposes what thought is or what it should do: any image, that is, which subjects it to the criterion of its effectiveness in serving a previously given or determined end. For this reason, it ultimately indicates the form of a far-reaching critique of effectivity itself. That is, in pointing out the structural undecidability which surrounds and inheres in every totally determined (and self-referential) situation, a consequence (as we have seen) of the very priority of problems as objective and ideal instances, the affirmation of strong critique also points to the specific limitation of all procedures for effectively determining their local “solutions” as total and consistent.

This indication is particularly decisive today, in that it points to the basis for the criticism of everything that seeks, in contemporary institutions, practices, and ways of life, to guarantee and maintain the consistent efficacy of the “solutions” provided by technology, capital, or administrative/bureaucratic forms of order. According to the principle of critique indicated here, any such solutions will only ever be partial, if they can be maintained consistently at all. And the various (overdetermined) rationalizations and ideologies that seek to guarantee their effectiveness are themselves possible only on the basis of their suppression and dissimulation of a more general *ineffectivity* basically characteristic of the original structure of sense.

This original ineffectivity has, once again, a formal motivation in the metalogical results by which twentieth-century formal thought reflects and measures its own inherent limits. Familiarly, Gödel’s second incompleteness theorem establishes that no formal system (of a certain minimal degree of expressive power) can guarantee its own consistency by means of an internal proof, unless in fact the system is in fact inconsistent and the guarantee is therefore false.⁵⁴ An intimately related result due to Turing establishes the inherent limits of so-called “effective” procedures: those that can be specified by a finite algorithm assured to produce a computational solution to a given problem in a finite number of steps. In both cases, the limit of effectiveness is shown

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⁵³ See especially Deleuze 1968, chapter 3.

⁵⁴ It is in most cases possible to prove the consistency of a system by means of a “higher” or more powerful system, but then the consistency of *that* system becomes open to question, and so forth.

at the point at which a problem is posed which cannot be resolved by finite means and in finite time. The problem nevertheless persists as the point of an irreducible exigency, forever irresolvable by procedural and regular methods.

This formal ineffectivity that is, as Gödel and Turing showed, structurally involved in any formal system with a minimal degree of complexity and self-referential power has an analogue in the “impassivity” that basically characterizes the logic of sense, according to Deleuze. In particular, by developing the structure of the paradox of regress which results from supposing every linguistic name itself to have a sense that is itself, as actual, capable of bearing a name, Deleuze argues that sense as the genetic basis for the powers of the proposition in asserting, manifesting, or denoting must itself be “sterile,” impassive, or inefficacious, itself a produced “surface effect” with respect to these activities of the proposition while nevertheless acting as their essential presupposition.⁵⁵ Neutral with respect to affirmation or denial, inherent in the proposition and responsible for its potential, sense must nevertheless be “indifferent to the universal and the singular, to the general and the particular, to the personal and the collective” in order to be at the neutral basis of propositions determined articulate in terms of one or more of these oppositions.⁵⁶ In taking up this structural position, sense is formally linked to the problem: it poses the paradox in an original form. Here we see the crucial characteristic of what Deleuze calls the “virtual”: what is real without being actual, determined and determining without being effective. Everywhere that thought encounters this basic ineffectivity which formally characterizes its constitutive power, it inscribes and confirms the virtuality of structure and its insistence in the real.

How, then, can ineffectivity be adopted as a critical maxim and affirmed as a praxis? There is no general formula for its application, but its implications are to be measured in each determined solution as unfolding the critical consequences of the paradoxical power of thought involved in it. Sometimes the implication is a maxim of withdrawal or punctual refusal, as perhaps with the figure of Bartleby the Scrivener, to whom both Deleuze and Agamben devote exemplary readings.⁵⁷ In other

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⁵⁵ Deleuze 1969, pp. 31-33.

⁵⁶ Deleuze 1969, p. 35.

⁵⁷ Deleuze 1993 and Agamben 1993.

cases it is the praxis of an active creation that is implied, the creative legislation of “new values” and the transformation of existing situations according to a basic reconfiguration of their sense. In either kind of case, however, what is essential is, as I have argued, never that thought determines the new in the form of whatever recognizable ends or assumed goals, even (or especially) those formed in the negative image of the existing situational parameters. What is crucial is rather to allow thought to produce, while maintaining its own specific integrity, the unrecognizable as the site of a life to come. There is no fixed formula or method for this production. As with the Nietzschean “revaluation of values” itself, it is not immediately clear whether it can be the basis of an “ethics” or what would be involved in determining it as one; at any rate, the least that can be said is that it is not a moralism. It is nevertheless assertible, on the demonstrable basis of the formal considerations themselves, that in allowing thought to pass beyond all determined criteria it indicates the structure of thought itself in relation to criteria as such and thereby formally reveals its point of contact with the real. That the transformation of structures, practices, and ways of life by means of this contact and around its fixed point be *produced* by thought’s power is then the affirmative principle of a politics to come.

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The Ideology of Life and the Necessity of its Critique

Jan Völker

ABSTRACT:

The notion of life presents a special challenge to theory. Theoretical conceptions of life tend to conceive of life as an ambiguous zone, neither purely objective, nor purely subjective. For any critique of the notion of life it becomes, thus, difficult to come to terms with its object. Can the notion of life become a target of a critique of ideology? On the one hand, the critique of ideology, as Žižek develops it, proves the necessity of a theoretical, and subjective, supplement as its condition of possibility, and psychoanalysis itself developed as a supplement to any objective notion of life. On the other hand, theory can attempt to present this split in the given itself. In the latter case, as I try to show in the work of Meillassoux, the notion of life necessarily reappears, as it is the essential conception of a transition between the ontological and the phenomenological. The first one to understand life as an ambiguous concept was Kant, and Meillassoux, thus, reiterates Kant in an absolute form. In absence of a conception of a supplementary subject, the notion of life then becomes uncriticisable. The possibility of such a critique depends upon the status of the subject.

Key words:

Kant, Žižek, Meillassoux, Life, Ideology, Materialism, Subjectivity

1) In which age are we living?

In the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant claims our age “to be the genuine age of *criticism*, to which everything must submit”¹. By critique, Kant explains, he does not “understand a critique of books and systems, but a critique of the faculty of reason in general, in respect of all the cognitions after which reason might strive *independently of all experience*, and hence the decisions about the possibility or impossibility of a metaphysics in general, and the determination of its sources, as well as its extent and boundaries, all, however, from principles.”² And, in the preface to the second edition, Kant adds a clear opponent of this method: “Those who reject this kind of teaching and simultaneously the procedure of critique of pure

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¹ Kant 1998, p. 100 (A xi).

² Kant 1998, p. 101 (A xii).

reason can have nothing else in mind except to throw off the fetters of science altogether, and to transform work into play, certainty into opinion, and philosophy into philodoxy.”³ Critique against philodoxy: critique, following Kant, is the determination of sources of reason, and the determination of its extent and boundaries; but, above all, critique is about work, certainty, and philosophy. The rest can only be play, opinion, and philodoxy. Critique, thus, has a double effect: it is the determination of the possibilities of reason, but at the same time it serves as a distinction from philodoxy. It is a twofold undertaking, a positive determination of sources on the one hand, and on the other hand, the negative side of critique is not the limitation of reason, but, rather, the cut by which it splits its time. Thus, if Kant understands his age to be the age of critique, this is not only an objective claim, establishing the fact of enlightenment taking place, but a critical claim also has a subjective side. A critical claim distinguishes philosophy from philodoxy, certainty from opinion, and work from play. If Kant understood his age to be the age of critique, this implies the subjective necessity, the demand, to overcome philodoxy. For Kant, critique became necessary, because there had been no “secure path of science” yet, instead “a mere groping, and what is the worst, a groping among mere concepts”.⁴ *Ein bloßes Herumtappen*, as the German reads, a blind stumbling around, without any orientation. Critique was sought to provide orientation in a situation of complete disorientation in metaphysics.

But, Kant's description of his age to be the one of critique dates back to 1781/1787, and the question is, in which age do we live? In the contemporary situation, disorientation arises mainly from a situation, which is often referred to as that of the death of ideologies. There is an implication to the formula of the “death of ideologies” that is highly symptomatic, as Alain Badiou remarks:

“This motif of the end of ideologies is essential. It comes with a good-natured tone: The ideologies have done so much harm!... But it is an extremely violent motif. Besides, it is not clear why ideologies should have been living and afterwards died. Ideologies are not a species of animals, it is not like with the elephants. It is prescriptive. Ideologies are neither alive nor dead, they are not organisms.”⁵

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3 Kant 1998, p. 120 (B xxxvii).

4 Kant 1998, p. 110 (B xv).

5 Badiou 2014, p. 125-126. My trans., J.V.

This might, at first, appear to be an anecdotal comment – of course, ideologies do not live and die like some animal species. But, it is remarkable that the idea of the end of ideologies is mixed with the conception of ideologies as living organisms. As if the evolutionary development had singled out ideologies, because they have proven to be incapable to survive. In Badiou's argument, this small comment refers indirectly to his identification of the contemporary ideology. In his *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou describes the contemporary ideological situation as a “democratic materialism” that only accepts the existences of “bodies and languages” and finally culminates in the imperative to live without an idea.⁶ This materialism is *democratic*, in the sense that it intends an objective equality of languages, but it is above all a *materialism* of life:

“In order to validate the equation ‘existence = individual = body’, contemporary doxa must valiantly reduce humanity to an overstretched vision of animality. ‘Human rights’ are the same as the rights of the living. The humanist protection of all living bodies: this is the norm of contemporary materialism. Today, this norm has a scientific name, ‘bioethics’, whose progressive reverse borrows its name from Foucault: ‘biopolitics’. Our materialism is therefore the materialism of life. It is a bio-materialism.”⁷

The aim of *Logics of Worlds*, then, is to set up another imperative, based on a materialist dialectic, an imperative that is the consequence of the exception of the idea: live with an idea! Badiou could, thus, be understood to mark our contemporary philodoxy as one that exempts the idea, and refers to the living, individual bodies. The assertion that there are exceptions to the logic of the given entities of bodies and languages is, of course, not a simple correction of the logic of the given. The exceptions open up to another logic: they are there as exceptions to the given. And, only from this point of view – the exceptional point of view – the contemporary ideology of bodies, and languages, can be said to be one without an idea. Despite the prevailing differences, Badiou is very Kantian in this point: the reference to the idea (to reason for Kant) is the necessary reference to be made against the reigning *philodoxy*, otherwise the *philodoxy* might not even get into view as a *philodoxy*, but simply is the description of what there is. But, the reference to the idea (or to reason in Kant) is the reference to something that is objectively indiscernible.

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6 Badiou 2009, p. 2

7 Badiou 2009, p. 2.

Thus, if one translates the Kantian formula into Badiou, then our age is the age of the idea. The actual situation of the idea is precarious, especially in terms of politics, but it is necessary to cling to the idea to gain the view on the contemporary ideology as a belief system, based on the givenness of bodies and languages. An idea, in Badiou's understanding, is a subjective construction of a truth procedure; but, at the same time, an idea is always in distance from any sort of opinion, from any construction without an idea. An idea combines certainty, work, and philosophy.

An idea, in the Badiouian sense, is not only the unfolding of a procedure, but it is also precisely based on a prescription – in politics, e.g., the idea is constructed and realised as the singular procedure to set the prescription of equality into work. In this first, basic sense, ideas are ideological, as they are prescriptive for their own singular operation. An idea splits the democratic materialism, by acknowledging that there are not only bodies and languages, but also truths. Therefore, put in other words, an idea splits the contemporary ideological notion of life as a pure animalistic happening of drives and needs. Within this paradigm of animalistic life, though, it is a 'natural' consequence that belief systems perish, because they can only be conceived of as organs in the circle of finitude. But, in the perspective of the Badiouian account, there is not only the precarious question of the idea, but also the question of the life, which appears on both sides: live without an idea, live with an idea. The idea is not set in opposition to the notion of life: rather the idea traverses the life of bodies and languages, and supplements a subjective stance to their objective givenness.

But, then, there is the ideological objectivity of bodies and languages, but what about the notion of life? For Kant, metaphysics was the "battlefield," in which reason permanently "got stuck,"⁸ and the critique of reason had the aim to provide a new ground for a new metaphysics. Is the battlefield of our time the notion of life? In a certain sense, one could think so, as it seems to be the case that the notion of life is, at least, one of the central notions of the "contemporary sophistry".⁹ What is it that makes life such a central notion? As I will

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8 Kant (B xiv-xv), p. 109.

9 Badiou 2009, p. 35. Let us not forget that, at least in continental philosophy, there is hardly any philosophy that does not allocate an important place to the question of life. There is a tradition from Foucault, Deleuze to Agamben and Malabou. These traditions can be examined as Aristotelian or Spinozist traditions, but I think one central paradigm of the notion of life has hitherto been omitted from the picture: Kant.

try to show in the following, the notion of life fits above all very well to a post-ideological ideology, i.e. an ideology that has passed beyond the confines of two objectively opposed terms. Life can be understood as a post-critical concept, and then it tends to absorb theory within itself. The tricky thing about the notion of life is, and this will be the main claim that I want to unfold in the following, that it presents a special challenge to theory. Theoretical conceptions of life tend to become indistinguishable from their object, if this very object – life – is conceived of as a zone of indistinguishability. I will try to explain these points by following very specific examples, not by jumping into the vast history of theories of life in modernity. First, in order to get to terms with the notion of ideology, I will reconstruct an older article, in which Slavoj Žižek explains the vicissitudes of the contemporary notion of ideology. I will then turn to the excerpts from Quentin Meillassoux's *L'inexistence divine*, to show that the development from *After Finitude* to *L'inexistence divine* mirrors the development from the first to the third critique. What I will try to show is that Meillassoux reiterates a Kantian aspect of the notion of life: namely the undecidability between its vitalist and its materialist understanding. The problem of the notion of life becomes visible in what could be called the naturalisation of the indistinguishable. Finally, life proves to be a tricky target for the critique of ideology, as it seems to be unideological in itself: maybe, therefore, a critique of the ideology of life is urgently needed. But, the possibility of such a critique depends upon the status of the subject.

2. The objectively undistinguishable standpoint of critique

Today, to put forward a statement on ideology is, more than ever, in itself already a critical gesture. The paradoxical time we are living in, in which ideologies are assumed to suffer the fate of living bodies, makes it possible that any insistence on the existence of ideology already implies a critical intention. The notion of ideology, thus, becomes in itself critical: once you start a discourse on contemporary ideology, you are, in fact in a critical discourse.

One of the first central problems to be remarked: even if the notion of ideology itself is already critical, is not the idea of critique in itself already hypocritical? As Slavoj Žižek has remarked, the suspicion also works the other way round, and one of the first doubts one might have is that the critique of ideology can be nothing else than ideological itself:

"[D]oes not the critique of ideology involve a privileged place, somehow exempted from the turmoils of social life, which enables some

subject-agent to perceive the very hidden mechanism that regulates social visibility and non-visibility? Is not the claim that we can accede to this place the most obvious case of ideology? Consequently, with reference to today's state of epistemological reflection, is not the notion of ideology self-defeating?"¹⁰

Then, there is not only ideological ideology, but also ideological critique. Both sides of one operation can be ideological: "When some procedure is denounced as 'ideological par excellence', one can be sure that its inversion is no less ideological."¹¹ The consequence from this is that, ideology is not about 'true' or 'false' in relation to the content. It needs, rather, to be distinguished from the content to escape this ambiguity, and it should instead be understood as a notion concerning the implied subjectivity of some procedure or operation: "An ideology is thus not necessarily 'false': as to its positive content, it can be 'true', quite accurate, since what really matters is not the asserted content as such but the way this content is related to the subjective position implied by its own process of enunciation."¹² So, we are passing from the side of the object, to the side of the subject.

But, how is, then, any possibility of a critique of ideology still possible? Would not such a possibility need criteria that are not only purely subjective? Žižek's first step is to distinguish different conceptions of ideology, as pertaining to different historical situations. The first historico-dialectical moment of ideology describes ideology as a system of beliefs, and its critique as a symptomal reading of its defective functions. The second moment externalises ideology, and explores "the material existence of ideology in ideological practices, rituals and institutions."¹³ Of course, Althusser, and the *Ideological State Apparatuses*, are here the important reference. Thirdly, "this externalization is, as it were, 'reflected into itself': what takes place is the disintegration, self-limitation and self-dispersal of the notion of ideology."¹⁴ After this distinction of three moments, Žižek then attempts to conceptualise the notion of ideology, but without falling short of its inner ambiguity or its dialectical structure. The problematic point, is,

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¹⁰ Žižek 1995, p. 3.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 4.

¹² Ibid., p. 8.

¹³ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

that for any possibility of a critique of ideology, there seems to be the necessity of a point outside of ideology, from which such a critique were possible in the first place. Surely, it is not an option to claim that this point is, simply, to be found in the affirmation that everything would be ideological, as then everything and nothing at the same time could be understood as 'inside' ideology, because, there is no 'outside' any more. Rather, ideology has a spectral or reflective gap inside its own notion, a gap that is inherently played out in the distance between 'spontaneous ideology,' and the necessity of active 'impositions' on the other hand. On the one hand, there is "*ideology that always-already pertains to materiality as such*" and on the other hand "*materiality that always-already pertains to ideology as such*".¹⁵ Ideology is never fully with itself, it is rather – even if Žižek might reject the term – a structure around a gap, rather than a presence. This is a general split, which then is rearticulated in a specific way through different historical modes of the division of labour, and the organisation of the state. Two important consequences are drawn from this structural gap inside ideology itself: first, ideology always distinguishes itself from some other "mere ideology".¹⁶ Ideology, thus, always has an enemy, one that perhaps most often is blamed to be ideological. And, second, the spontaneous part of ideology is not simply to be equated with a distinction between 'spirit' and 'matter'. This is the question of the spectre, without which no reality can exist. Reality as such, and Žižek follows Lacan in this point, cannot be fully symbolised, there is always a necessary gap in this structure in which precisely the specter arises. "What the spectre conceals is not reality but its 'primordially repressed', the irrerepresentable X on whose 'repression' reality itself is founded."¹⁷ The spectre is the apparition of the real of reality, its repressed moment in a different form.

One name, under which this spectre can be thought of, is the name of class struggle: it is the X which appears only in the moment in which it is tried to be effaced. The crucial point, here, is that in this sense class struggle cannot be objectified, it has no objective reality, but it is rather the real of this reality, in the sense that it is the oppressed moment of the social constructions. It prevents "the objective (social) reality

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¹⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

from constituting itself as a self-enclosed whole.”¹⁸ It is, precisely this repressed real point that, in Žižek’s view, enables a critique of ideology today. But, this point is subject to a decision at the same time: it is possible to conceive of it as the index of a zone of the spiritual Other, as Žižek reads Derrida – then freedom is only partially accessible. Or, one conceives of this point as an impossible possibility, upon which an act is needed that breaks with the symbolic reality. Then the spectre is the truly false guise of the void of freedom. Depending on this decision, freedom is to come, and will always be yet-to-come, or “the act of freedom qua real not only transgresses the limits of what we experience as ‘reality’, it cancels out our very primordial indebtedness to the spectral Other.”¹⁹ In abstract terms then, the critique of ideology will have to have a conception of ideology based on a constitutively missing real element, and a renewed understanding of materialism needs to present itself as a genuine incomplete theoretical edifice. “It is at this precise place that psychoanalysis has to intervene (...) - not, of course, in the old Freudo-Marxist manner, as the element destined to fill up the hole of historical materialism and thus to render possible its completion, but, on the contrary, as the theory that enables us to conceptualize this hole of historical materialism as irreducible, because it is constitutive.”²⁰ Thus, psychoanalysis is needed as a theoretical supplement to prevent philosophy from the threat of closure, and to theoretically grasp the point of departure for any possible critique of ideology today. Through the historico-dialectical steps, which Žižek unfolds in the course of his argument, it becomes clear that this argument itself is unfolded in a very specific dialectical and historical setting: it is our contemporaneity, in which psychoanalysis is needed, and it is the modern subject we are dealing with: “One should always bear in mind that the subject of psychoanalysis is not some primordial subject of drives, but as Lacan pointed out again and again - the modern, Cartesian subject of science.”²¹

For our purpose here, we might underline that psychoanalysis can pinpoint an objectively undistinguishable ground for the critique of ideology, a ground that is an abyss to be taken as a starting point for a

.....
18 Ibid., p. 21.

19 Ibid., p. 27-28.

20 Ibid., p. 28.

21 Ibid., p. 29.

renewed materialism that avoids ideological closure.

If one takes this argument back to the beginnings of psychoanalysis, one might claim that this was the point psychoanalysis made in its beginnings against the medical discourse on life: not only does the infamous notion of the death drive, in its Freudian and Lacanian variants, imply the immanent question if there is a nature of drives – do drives tend to finally dissolve themselves in the anorganic or do we live because we stumble on, because the drive of life is the principle of more-than-death – but also psychoanalysis is from its beginnings on the attempt to present a surplus to the objective account of nature, natural life. Psychoanalysis implies the question: what is it to live? In its twofold relation – what is to live in a biological, scientific understanding, and what is to live in the precise difference to the former understanding. But, to psychoanalysis, life is question of a surplus to nature, and not the name for the analysis of the most general structure of (human) nature, as Alenka Zupančič makes it clear:

“The image of human nature that follows from these Freudian conceptualisations is that of a split (and conflictual) nature, whereby ‘sexual’ refers to this very split. If Freud uses the term ‘libido’ to refer to a certain field of ‘energy,’ it is to refer to it as a *surplus* energy, and not to any kind of general energetic level involved in our lives. It cannot designate the whole of energy (as Jung suggested), since it is precisely what makes this whole ‘not-whole.’”²²

It is, in this sense, that the notion of the sexual needs to be understood: it refers to an “irreducible unbalance of human nature” and the “generative source of culture is sexual in this precise sense of belonging to the supplementary satisfaction that serves no immediate function and satisfies no immediate need.”²³

If one understands the crucial point of psychoanalysis to be that the meaning of life is precisely the exemption from pure natural and biological relations, we can see that the argument Žižek makes parallels this move of psychoanalysis: the point of psychoanalysis, why it is necessary for contemporary theory, is that it proves there to be more than the simple given (the belief in objective structures of the society hinders us for example to grasp the in-objective real of class struggle). Thus, psychoanalysis can, from the beginning on, be understood as

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22 Zupančič 2008, p. 10-11.

23 Zupančič 2008, p. 10.

an intervention against the reduction of human life to purely natural, objective causalities. In other words, psychoanalysis is the supplement of the objectively indistinguishable surplus of life and the critique of its naturalisation.

In this perspective, it seems as if the target of a possible critique of ideology necessarily is some fully (objectively/subjectively) determined entity, be it the 'social reality' or the notion of 'life'. But, at this point, one could also ask: what happens when this target itself proves to have indistinguishable traits, being unfolded inbetween objective and subjective determinations. It might well be that certain theories of the notion of life present life precisely as this: as a category of something which is not completely determinable. But then, this notion of life might bear a challenge for possibility of a critique of ideology: if life as such is not a totality, can it then be ideological?

In the following, I will try to unfold, and explain, these questions in the context of one philosopher, who is very attentive to the question of totalisation. Nevertheless, we will see that the question of the subjective supplement becomes suspended. The question, thus, becomes, if a non-totalisable objectivity can be objectively thought of, and if this is a different materialism to the one building on the notion of the suppressed real and the supplement of the act. And, for Meillassoux's conception, it is precisely the notion of life that plays a crucial role.

3. Divine Inexistence and the advent of life

In Meillassoux, the question of life comes to the fore in the frame of an ethical perspective: in his unpublished book, named *The Divine Inexistence*, of which we know only excerpts, from Graham Harman's book on Meillassoux, the central point is the possibility of the *resurrection of the dead* combined with an *ethics of immortality*.

Thus, when Meillassoux's first book, *After Finitude*, opposed metaphysics as a power leading to faith and to ideological irrationality, and, in this regard, developed speculative realism as a critique of ideology, then the fragments of *Divine Inexistence* go a step further, and attempt to discuss an ethics based on an ontology of contingency. But, perhaps the genealogy is even different: if one recalls that *Divine Inexistence* is actually the unpublished dissertation of Meillassoux, then ethics as a topic might, however, be of greater importance for the project of speculative materialism than *After Finitude* suggests. One might get the impression that there is an ethical demand already at the ground of the ontology of *After Finitude*. Be this as it may, the fragments

in Harman's book haven been revised by Meillassoux, and have been fit into the framework of *After Finitude*, such that we are on the same ground in terms of concepts.

These fragments are concerned with phenomenological appearances, and especially those appearances that radically change the sense of what might be addressed as 'the world' in a first attempt. Meillassoux discusses the emergences of matter, life, and, thought that follow one after another. Each of these emergences radically changes its before. The main question here is: how can one conceive of these changes without deducing them from their before, without reducing them to an effect following from a cause? The appearance of radical novelty is Meillassoux's topic in these fragments: how to account for something new in the realm of appearances without reducing it to the old.

For the context of my argument, two things are interesting here, which are to be unfolded in the following: 1) if *After Finitude* was the attempt of a reversal of Kantian correlationism, and thereby a reversal of the general Kantian frame, *Divine Inexistence* proves to continue this reversal of Kant, but now on the inside: a systematic Kantian framework is picked up and repeated, but with the attempt to completely change its meaning. This inner framework is the constellation of matter, life, beauty and ethics. 2) If *After Finitude* sought to establish a new understanding of the absolute, an absolute thought separated from any notion of the subject, then the phenomenological perspective of *Divine Inexistence* brings the absence of the subject to the fore. And, from this point, it might become necessary to question the concept of speculative realism from the point of the missing theory of the subject.

Even if overly simplifying, it might be necessary to reconstruct the central issues of the fragments at first. One of the main keywords here is *justice*, because justice signifies for Meillassoux the material appearance of a universal.²⁴ Justice, in the context of *Divine Inexistence*, is developed as the consequence of the axiom of contingency as being the only necessity there is. And this latter thesis, the central thesis from the book *After Finitude*, claims that everything given is contingent in its

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²⁴ We see here how close Meillassoux follows Badiou, and at which point he parts his own way: Badiou defines justice as a concept in the realm of politics: "Justice means examining any situation from the point of view of an egalitarian norm vindicated as universal." (Badiou 2012, p. 29). If politics, as a truth procedure, realises universality, it realises the impossibility of being to prefigure the event. Meillassoux, however, translates this non-relation back into a relation, for justice here relates the phenomena to the ontology of contingency.

being given, but that contingency itself is necessary, the only necessity that can be known and that is absolutely valid. This rational concept of the absolute is gained through an internal turn of that principle which Meillassoux calls *correlationism*: namely that Kant's reigning thesis that cognition of the absolute were impossible, because any cognition whatsoever is bound to the subject and therefore relative. Meillassoux's main argument is to prove that the correlationist, if he or she wants to avoid becoming an idealist, is implicitly constraint to make an absolute presupposition.²⁵ If the strong correlationist, that is the one who radicalises Kant's argument, says that one cannot say anything about something outside the correlation of thought–being, then the idealist answers: right, there exists nothing outside this correlation. The correlationist cannot agree, for he has no insight, not even negatively, into anything beyond the correlation. He has to answer that it is only *that we cannot say or know anything*, whereas, it would still be possible that something else exists. But, this entails that the correlationist has to concede that there is another absolute possibility: namely, that everything could be completely different. Voilà: this contingency becomes necessary, because it founds the possible cognition of the given in the first place.

Now, one can draw relatively particular consequences from this foundation of the absolute in the contingency of the given. If it is possible that everything changes without any reason in one instant, that all natural laws lose their consistency, then it might also be possible that the dead resurrect, just like it once has been possible that matter, life and then thought came about. The first objection against this 'anything goes! Even the dead may resurrect!' might be that, in this case (anything goes), everything would be in the state of pure chaos, and therefore stable; but here Meillassoux's claim is that the absolute contingency does not necessarily imply the permanent chaos: rather there can be a consistency of empirical laws, however, their very foundation will have to be recognized as contingent. Thus, the question of the resurrection is more complicated than a simple 'anything goes'.

So, *justice* is a keyword. Justice is a tricky keyword though, because it combines two understandings. The first, already mentioned, is the combination of the singular and the universal, but justice does also refer to the peculiar *ethical* understanding of justice, namely to do justice, to re-establish justice, to undo harm. The world, which

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²⁵ For the following, see Meillassoux 2008, p. 36–42.

Meillassoux demands to think, is a world of justice in both of its senses, and therefore the resurrection needs to be thought: “[F]or it is only the World of the rebirth of humans that makes universal justice possible, by erasing even the injustice of shattered lives.”²⁶ The ethical imperative that is connected to this necessity of absolute contingency, brings us to the demand to live in the face of this possibility. *Divine Inexistence* could be translated into: divine life, which would mean: “Live in that manner that you anticipate the divine, even if you know that it does not exist!”

As the resurrection of the dead is for us something which can only be thought in religious terms, and is otherwise completely inexplicable, the first question that needs to be solved is the question if it is possible to think something that would be so new that it exceeds the boundaries of our understanding. The appearance of a radical novelty becomes, therefore, the major interest of the fragments of *Divine Inexistence*. As already has been indicated, Meillassoux identifies three major events of novelty, namely the advent of matter, the advent of life, and the advent of thought. The principle of these events is an event *ex nihilo*. But how to understand the phrase ‘*ex nihilo*’ if it does not only serve as a formula which covers up an unsolvable problem? As a name for an enigma?

The argument takes its starting point in Russell's paradox of set theory. Becoming cannot be understood as the actualisation of a set of possibilities, because there cannot be a set of all sets of possibilities, there cannot be a set of possibilities that includes this specific set of actualised possibilities. Meillassoux's argument is tricky: It is not say that we have to abolish God and to *assume* that the world was somehow created *ex nihilo*. But, if one not simply wants to allege the creation *ex nihilo*, how then actually find a proof that emergence *ex nihilo* is possible? For Meillassoux, the *ex nihilo* is proven in the given. If an emergence *ex nihilo* can be understood as the excess of the effect over the cause,²⁷ then it can also be understood as the excess of quality over quantity. This excess is given amidst the given material world:

“All quality as quality is without why, since none of its content refers to anything other than the advent *ex nihilo* of its being. The absurdity of asking why red is red suffices to reveal the excess of becoming over every law: its capacity for creating new cases from nothing, cases for which no genealogy can be established in the world

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²⁶ Meillassoux 2011, p. 190.

²⁷ See Meillassoux 2011, p. 177.

prior to its emergence. A red is without why because no material underpinning can ever tell us how this red is red. (...) The remarkable thing is that the brute facticity of quality is where the inexistence of the Whole is immediately given. For the facticity of quality refers to its advent *ex nihilo*, which refers in turn to the absence of an originary Whole from which it could be inferred with complete necessity.”²⁸

Thus, creation *ex nihilo* is actually present. Meillassoux, then, unfolds this argument more closely, with regard to the emergence of life and he directly refers to discussions from the 19th century about its emergence. On the one hand, the thesis of *hylozoism* needed to claim that there exists animated matter from the beginning; on the other hand, the only alternative was to claim a strong dualism between soul and matter. As Meillassoux puts it: “As such, the rigid alternative that supported Diderot’s belief in universal sentience continues to hold: either we renounce the materialist hypothesis and institute an irresolvable dualism between soul and body, or we maintain the essential unity and require ‘that stones think’.”²⁹

The alternative, which Meillassoux develops to get out of this impasse of materialism, is not only to think the advent of life as an event *ex nihilo*; but also to claim that this advent retroactively reorganizes the structures of matter. That “there is more in the effect than in the cause”³⁰ may explain the advent as such, but it also needs to be explained how this ‘more’ is transforming the material laws, if the explanation of the advent shall be a rational one. The advent of life, therefore, has a qualitative and a quantitative side: the qualitative advent changes retroactively the conditions to which it has not been related before.

This explanation of the advent of life avoids the impasses of 19th century alternative between a dualism (which in fact was not even a real alternative) and the thesis of animated matter. It was not even a real alternative, because Hylozoism, the thesis of animated matter, leads to the necessity of explaining the different intensities of life. Meillassoux refers to Bergson, who criticised that intensity here served “only to mask qualitative discontinuity by means of mathematical continuity”.³¹ Thus

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28 Meillassoux 2011, p. 181.

29 Meillassoux 2011, p. 182.

30 Meillassoux 2011, p. 177.

31 Meillassoux 2011, p. 182.

both explanations, hylozoism as well as dualism, end in metaphysics. Life presents a stumbling block for any theory of immanence that wants to explain the coming about of the new. Three points are remarkable in this account: 1) creation *ex nihilo* is not only a question of *some* emerging quality, but rather the emergence of quality as such and its retroactive inscription into quantity. 2) From this point of the argument the previous alternative between dualism and hylozoism proves to be not an alternative at all, and 3) the explanation of life repeats the question of the contingency of laws in a very peculiar sense. For it is not only that the contingent novelty of something has to be explained, but also how consistency of laws despite their general contingency, can be explained.

At this point one might recall that Meillassoux’s project in its main frame is conceived as a rejection of correlationism and more or less explicitly as a rejection of Kantianism. But, *Divine Inexistence* goes a step further and turns speculative realism into what could be said to be the most faithful inversion of Kant possible. This turn consists of two steps. The first step, done in *After Finitude*, was to rearrange for a ground to think the absolute: instead of creating space for religion by redirecting metaphysics such that it makes faith possible and demonstrates us the necessity of this faith at the same time, metaphysics finds itself now deprived of its core, the absolute has moved onto the world as *absolute contingency* and thus a space is created to believe in that of which you know that it does not exist (as Meillassoux will put it later on).³² This ontological inversion of Kant brings us to a second step, which can only implicitly be found in Meillassoux: the repetition of *the* Kantian problem, his main question that he attempted to tackle through many of his books, namely: how to understand the emergence of life as a novelty but without reducing it to some previous cause. Meillassoux does not discuss this, but it can be taken as the background for *Divine Inexistence*.

In Kant, the most advanced answer he gives is found in the *Third Critique*, and this answer will be developed in the context of the beautiful on the one hand, and the question of life on the other. Of course, both parts belong together, and I would argue that the transcendental turn in the end is even motivated by the hitherto unsolvable question of life.³³ How can life be explained, if it is not to be reduced to some previous metaphysical entity (like animated matter), nor to some previous

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32 „[B]elieving in God because he does not exist“, Meillassoux 2011, p. 239.

33 This would be the central argument I develop further in my book on Kant: Voelker 2011.

quality (God)? This question can be transformed into the question of how to explain a given singularity without presupposing that there is a previously constituted generality (*objektive Allgemeinheit*, in Kant), a law, in the realm of which it was already implied as a possibility. You cannot simply deduce it, nor is it possible to simply accept it as something strange, which just does not fall under the previous laws. One needs a conception of this strange thing appearing, this strange appearance outside every law. If the law of the laws, the law that accounts for the emergence of laws, cannot explain the emergence of a new singularity you are put in a highly problematic situation. You would have to argue that you have laws of nature for example and you have laws of laws, but then you stumble on something new, and this undefined novelty simply breaks your chain of laws. And then you are left with a split between this novelty and your law of the laws – and the only thing left is to say: there are laws of nature, and there are laws that explain the continuity and the relation of laws, and if something new arises that does not fit this chain of laws than it can only prove that there is a bigger law, a law of the law of laws, or God. Thus, both explanations do not work: neither can the novelty be simply explained as a consequence of the given, nor can it simply be stated as something new that is in absolutely no connection with your general idea of laws (of appearance). If anything, then this is precisely the question of Kant's third critique.

Thus, we remark a strange repetition of Kant here. For it was Kant who sought to invert the relation between subject and object, and in the consequence of this inversion, he was confronted with the appearances of strange things or events that mark a novelty inside the transcendental realm without being deducible from it. Because, for Kant, the central law of coherence is called nature, and the specific moment of novelty, of radical change is precisely life. Life is the thing that emerges in nature without obeying to its laws. And life correlates with beauty for one single reason: because life marks the same difference inside the *objectivity* of nature, as beauty marks a difference on the side of the *subject*. Beauty is the name for the subjective experience of pleasure without any objective reason. Because of the transcendental turn – objects follow the law of the subject – both sides come with an inner twist. The difference on the side of the objects, on the side of nature, is not purely objective, but has to be understood as an objective difference *for transcendental subjectivity*, that is a difference inside transcendental subjectivity itself, or: it is a subjective difference or split at the same time. Beauty, as subjective phenomenon on the other hand, cannot be

understood in purely subjective terms, because in some sense, the split of the beautiful splits (transcendental) subjectivity and cannot be subjective alone, it presents something else to the transcendental subject. And as such beauty marks a quasi-objective split in subjectivity, which is the split on which the subject as a subject of experience will be founded. It is here that another subject enters the scene: the subject of the beautiful is not the transcendental I, but the subject of a contingent experience of a non-objective gap (the beautiful) in nature.³⁴ The question of ethics follows: because this split founds the subject, and is a split that can precisely not be founded in nature, a split that has no grounds in any metaphysical entity, the subject is only subject when it recalls its founding character. You have to live in that way that you recall the split of subjectivity, because subjectivity does not have any other ground. In Kant the question of the beautiful will then be connected with the morally good. But the term 'justice', that Meillassoux uses, seems to take the same place. Justice names the relation of this non-relation. Law and Singularity, Nature and Life, the Split and Subjectivity – it is the problem of relation that has to be thought as a relation of two sides that do not relate, but at the same time cannot be understood without relation. Justice names this relation without relation.

And then we see that Meillassoux's argument is a complete repetition of the Kantian structure. Strangely enough, the inversion of the transcendental frame in Meillassoux leads to the same problems as Kant was led to, above all to the question of life.

But, where is the systematic place of beauty in Meillassoux? Beauty, for Meillassoux, stems from the faithfulness to ethics. In fidelity to the knowledge about the necessity of the contingency of everything given, which makes the resurrection of the dead as a contingent event possible, in this fidelity the speculative materialist is not a fatalist who waits upon the new human mankind to arise. Precisely because the necessity of contingency is a thought, it can only be upheld as thinking and cannot relapse into faith, but needs the permanent confirmation by thought, which upholds the necessity of contingency. This confirmation is basically a confirmation that at any point in time things can be different, and as such the confirmation is an anticipation of a possible change. But it is an active anticipation. The anticipation of change keeps change in the realm of the possible, and change might contingently come true.

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³⁴ See Rado Riha 2009 for the difference of the subject in Kant.

But, the contingent coincidence of hope and being is what Kant, as Meillassoux has it, describes as beauty.³⁵ The sphere of beauty in Kant is closely linked to that of ethics, and the bridge that Kant builds is the question of the symbol. Via the symbol Kant achieves the link between the beautiful and the morally good, because the beautiful is conceived as a symbol of the morally good. Meillassoux takes up this point as well: it is the realm of the symbol in which the link between being and value or being and thought is anticipated. Our time, for Meillassoux, is in the quest of a new symbol to enable this link, as the old symbolic orders have ended: the cosmological symbol as the coherence of the universe and the earth has broken under the influence of science. It became the romantic symbol of the coherence of man and nature, which because of its deficiencies was superseded by the historical symbol. And it is the end of the historical symbol, which we are witnessing in our time. For Meillassoux, all of the previous symbols depended on metaphysics, whereas the new symbol that emerges from the necessity of the contingency of everything given, detaches itself from metaphysics and links an absolute that is no longer metaphysical with an ethics in the world of phenomena. The symbol, here, is a phenomenal sign for the possible appearance of justice. The appearance of the new symbol anticipates the appearance of the universal, i.e. justice.

Thus, there is on the one hand an indirect repetition of Kant's understanding of beauty as a symbol of morality. The beautiful, in Meillassoux's rendering, is no longer the symbol, but the beautiful corresponds to the phenomenal appearance of the universal, that follows upon the symbol. Differently put: the appearing symbol anticipates the coming beauty of justice. But this is not only Kantian, because on the other hand, the history of the symbol that Meillassoux unfolds reminds of the Hegelian structure. In Hegel, we find the partition in symbolic, classical and romantic forms of art. For Hegel, art was *symbolic* as the ambiguity and inadequacy between sensitivity and meaning. Art was *classic*, as the relation of equivalence and finally art was *romantic* as the renewed disintegration and documentation of this disintegration. In Meillassoux's account both traditions are set into a relation: In the Kantian context we can read the emphasis on a history of the symbol as a Hegelian critique. But, insofar as all three types of symbols are recognised as metaphysical symbols, Meillassoux also applies a Kantian critique to the Hegelian stance. In relation to both

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35 See Meillassoux 2011, p. 218.

stances, the absolute metaphysical form is the one of the identity of identity and non-identity. In opposition to this suspension of difference, Meillassoux proposes the inclusion of the Kantian and the Hegelian stance in that *moment* of a history of the symbol in which the new symbol leads to the beautiful as coincidence of thinking and being *in the form of the just act*. "In other words, the universal can arise only on the condition that it be awaited as such *in the present*. It must be actively anticipated by acts of justice marked by fervent commitment to the radical requirement of universality, and by the discovery of the non- absurdity of such a requirement. This amounts to affirming that *the final World can commence only on the condition that it be a recommencement*."³⁶

Beauty, and justice, historicity and the act, and the possible resurrection of the dead. Why do questions of life and beauty appear central in a philosophical system, which tries to think a rational absolute? The decisive question here is, whether there is a necessary link between the construction of such a system, which understands itself to be materialist, and the questions of beauty and of life? There are two objections against the relevance of this question, which should be rejected in advance:

First, one could argue that the question of life is central for any philosophy, because any philosophy will have to touch upon questions concerning how we want to live, the question of ethics. But, one should not all too quickly conflate the ethical question with the question of speculative materialism. Meillassoux aims at the possibility of the emergence of life as such, independent of its specific dimensions. And the question of ethics finds its point as the consequence of the relation between the ontological and the phenomenological. Because this is the explicit claim of *Divine Inexistence*: The ontological serves as a ground for an ethics. Ethics, thus, here is not the name for the question of how we want to live amidst the given, but rather the name for a possible demand for the universal. But still, against this, one could argue that the question of life and ethics only touches upon the ontological if being is equated with *phusis*.

The second objection could bring forward that, in the contemporary debates, the question of life plays a decisive role and that the role of bio-scientific developments has turned the question of life into a huge obstacle for materialism. Here, the speculative materialist might play the ontological card again and simply refer to the

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36 Meillassoux 2011, p. 215.

contingency of anything given, and might thus reject the significance of any contemporary development.

If both objections are rejected, the conclusion can only be that the appearance of topics like life, beauty, and ethics marks the point of intersection between the ontological and the phenomenological. The question of life seems to be one, without which speculative materialism cannot understand itself as materialist. So this is the first necessary question: why and how do life and the beautiful allow for a bridge between the ontological and the phenomenological? The second question leads to a systematic omission or to a blind spot in the debate on speculative materialism. Of course, a blind spot is perhaps not only an omission, but maybe a suspension, a calculated absence or a conditioned absence. But nevertheless: who is the *subject* of this life, this ethics, this beautiful? Is there a subject of speculative realism? Against this question, one could obviously reply that this question might be nonsensical, for the whole project consists in the idea to establish a concept of the absolute in thought, precisely without any necessary dependence on any subject. The whole project is about the decoupling of object and subject, correlationism was the reign of the subject – so why insist on the point of the subject?

The assumption would be the following: maybe, if one agrees with the aim of speculative materialism – that it is necessary to think the absolute –, maybe this thought of the absolute precisely demands a new thought of the subject. What if the absolute cannot be thought without a different conception of the subject, one that differs from the so-called correlationist notion of the subject?

But still, there might be the second objection to this question: obviously there is a subject of the *ethics of the absolute*, namely that subject that realizes in its acts the *Divine Inexistence*. Thus, we can sharpen the second question and combine it with the first: is it one and the same subject that realises the necessity of the contingency of everything given? Is the subject one? One, which in the end would have an ontological status?

4. The ambiguity of vitalism and the materialist supplement

As was seen in the discussion of the emergence of quality, it is an essential point that for Meillassoux that this emergence ex nihilo is given, and with it the inexistence of the Whole: “The remarkable thing is that the brute facticity of quality is where the inexistence of the Whole

is immediately given.”³⁷ It seems clear that, for Kant, the point is exactly the opposite: the whole problem of the questions of life and the beautiful is a problem of subjectivity, even though we find in the third Critique – this is where Kant discusses the questions of life and the beautiful – a transition from a purely transcendental subjectivity to a subjectivity that is not presupposed. In the *Critique of Judgment-Power*, finally, appears a problematic subject, based on the experience of pleasure as a non-objective feeling. It is the non-objectivity, which is necessary for the possibility to uphold the universality of the aesthetic judgment. The aesthetic subject expresses its difference from anything objective. But, because, for Kant, in the last instance the realm of the given is nature, subjectivity can also be understood as a point of difference in nature – the point at which nature differs from itself. This construction opens up one central ambiguity: is subjectivity then, understood as human life, a split in nature, is spirit a part of nature, its inner difference, or is subjectivity a non-natural but nonetheless indeterminable difference?

I would propose to understand this ambiguity, in non-Kantian terms, as a distinction between vitalism and materialism. The vitalist option (in Kant) would be to understand that nature differs from itself, and that this difference is the core of (its) being. But why then conceive of the alternative structure as materialist? Because Kant, in his attempt to develop the notions of life and of the beautiful, insists at the same time on point of the infinite judgment, that kind of judgment that ascribes existence only via the negation of a predicate: the soul is not-dead is here the most famous example which Kant discusses in the Critique of Pure Reason, this is to say: the soul exists as something that is undead.³⁸ The core of life, as well as the beautiful, can only be determined in negative manner, although it exists. Life exists precisely as non-natural. While the beautiful is a feeling of non-objective character, the point of life is its irreducibility to the conceptual laws of nature. Therefore, the difference from nature to itself cannot objectively be stated.

Kant develops this understanding of life as a direct consequence of the impossibility to explain life in the old way of reducing life to some special element in nature or as dualism, that is to say he starts at the same point as Meillassoux, but he draws a different consequence from

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37 Meillassoux 2011, p. 181.

38 See Kant (A 72), p. 207. I develop this extensively in Voelker 2011. Also Slavoj Žižek has underlined this point on different occasions.

it. The old explanation of life, if it did not want to refer to a dualism, needed to single out a peculiar element of nature upon which life depends. And, insofar as the old way of understanding implicitly always has been Aristotelian, presupposing the given entity of nature, *physis*, there are good reasons to argue that Kant in his third critique lays the latent foundation for a revolution of materialist thought: life becomes for the first time an irreducible quality, its own term, without referring to a dualism, nor being an entity of nature. Life points to a materialism without object. The method that enables this understanding is the infinite judgment, to understand life as the non-natural emergence from nature.

But, it is left undecided in Kant, whether this irreducible quality belongs nevertheless to nature, for example as its inner split, or whether this quality is not only irreducible, but can also not be explained via the laws of nature. For Kant, all there is, is only nature, and the understanding of nature and the regulation of this understanding as reason. As there is no ontology Kant that would allow to make a distinction between the nature we experience and a different level of being, there seems to be no chance for Kant to keep the two spheres – the one of nature and the difference from it – apart. But even if left undecided, Kant indicated a philosophical resistance to the reduction of the difference to the one of nature. He indicated that philosophy might have to resist the temptation to re-inscribe the difference from nature into the laws of nature again.

This ambiguity should then, again, in a non-Kantian use of the terms, be understood as the double possibility of vitalism and materialism in Kant. Based on this, one could emphasise as a possible first distinction between vitalism and materialism the question of a moved substance (nature as differing from itself): vitalist would be those systems, which in their arguments refer to one and the same substance as *becoming*, directly or indirectly. A vitalist logic refers the emergence of life back to the movement (be it via a split) of substance, installing a direct link between the moving substance and the emergence of life. In contrast to this, a materialist thought cannot simply negate this chain without falling into dualism. As the choice between hylozoism and dualism proves again to be no choice, a materialist thought would need to turn the Kantian point from the implicit to the explicit. In Kant, this point is left undecided and implicit, and therefore this negation of a continuum of nature risks to become part of this continuous logic itself. *A materialist logic needs to interrupt itself, for if it does not interrupt itself, it*

will necessarily become a stable logic, and enable a stable causality between substance and life, the ontological and the phaenomenological. In a certain way, Meillassoux actually sees this point very clearly: A materialist logic needs not only to account for absolute contingency, but also for relative stability, because otherwise the point would only be to insist on total chaos of the given, another conception of stability. The total chaos is nothing else than an anarchist metaphysical account: everything changes at any possible time, the only thing that can be said is that there is nothing stable. Which is pure stability.

But back to Kant: if the Kantian system can be said to not allow for an interruption of its own system – that is a systematic change of itself without any previous cause – we could then conclude that it stays implicitly vitalist, because it does not provide any means to exclude vitalism. Of course, the underlying presumption is that systematic thought has an inherent tendency to turn to vitalism, and as such, the materialist task is to provide means to prevent its own slipping into vitalism. Is this to say that vitalism is the natural state of theory? Yes, but one would conceive this naturalism as one ascribed from the point of materialism. Because, apart from the materialist perspective, simply nothing happens, as vitalism in the last end is stability. Nothing new comes about. Thus, it is only from a materialist perspective that another thought can be identified, and identified as vitalist. Only from a change in nature thought can arise and can identify another thought.

But, is life a subjective or an objective force? What Kant in fact does, is to overcome the old dualist position: there is matter and then there is animation, as well as the old vitalist position: (some) matter is animated through an inner objective force. And he overcomes the dualism between subject and object: from a Kantian point of view, the old materialist has to exclude the question of the subject, because in the last instance the subject will become a metaphysical claim. And the old vitalist has to neglect materialism at a certain point, for he has to claim that there is some inherent force in nature that cannot be reduced to matter. The question that has to follow is one about the status of this ambiguity itself.

Kant transfers this opposition into an undecidable ambiguity in which life follows a non-objective logic that can only subjectively be grasped. But Kant links this ambiguity in the last instance to 'nature' as its conceptual background, 'nature' is the frame in which this ambiguity can arise, and precisely this brings along the risk of a stabilisation of this logic, and therefore the ambiguity between materialism and vitalism

in Kant can be understood to be itself overdetermined in a vitalist mode.

Kant invented the doubled suspension of these oppositions between subject/object and vitalism/materialism, and a good part of the contemporary theory works inside the space of this doubled suspension when it comes to the question of life. Life becomes an objectively indistinguishable force of nature. But, as long as nature is taken as a given entity, and as long as there is no account for the absolutely new, this undecidable ambiguity risks to become stable as such.

Implicit vitalism would mean any theory that cannot provide any means by which its basic figure of thought is prevented from referring to one, closed entity. To put it even more bluntly: any theory that is not capable to actively prevent that it could be understood as the theory of one form, movement, or relation is immanently vitalist, because in the end it will have to subscribe that this one form, movement, or relation is the one that explains not only being, but also becoming. A materialism, which begins with a given entity, is in its end indistinguishable from a vitalism.

If we return to Meillassoux at this point, we can at first recall the point that it is not the case that there was no question of the subject in speculative realism. On the contrary, the turn to ethics, the question of the act, the anticipatory producing of justice, this turn implies of course the question of the subject. Right at the beginning of *After Finitude*, when the problem of correlationism is brought on the table, Meillassoux sees that correlationism not only crosses out the possibility to think any object apart from its relation to the subject, but that the correlationist is also incapable to think a subject apart from its relation to an object.³⁹ It would be false to say that speculative realism does not address the question of the subject: But this question is put in a specific manner that entails a specific problem. Meillassoux criticises the transcendental subject as one that is always positioned in the world, a subject that is inseparable from its body and that as a condition of knowledge thereby prevents the possibility of absolute knowledge.⁴⁰ One may criticise this interpretation of the transcendental subject, but Meillassoux's reading nevertheless indicates an important point: For there is indeed an ambiguity of the subject in Kant, between the transcendental subject and the subject of the third critique. But, in Meillassoux,

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39 Meillassoux 2008, p. 5.

40 See Meillassoux 2008, p. 25.

the absolute is being realized by the subject acting according to an ethics that is build on the absolute necessity of contingency. The point of universality is desubjectified. And thus, the realisation of this absolute marks a possible equivalence between the ontological and the phenomenological, an equivalence that then is called beautiful. This equivalence can be understood to be the contingent realization of the absolute by a subject. But, because the ontology of contingency precedes the subject, this subject is indeed not a subject of a process, but it is the direct equivalence of a point zero of becoming. It responds to an ambiguity which Meillassoux tends to leave undecided: that is, if the claim about the necessity of the absolute contingency of everything given as a statement is itself given, is it then thereby contingent? But, because Meillassoux leaves this final question undecided, the series of consequences from this undecided claim makes it only possible to think of two choices: either, the claim about absolute contingency is in itself absolutely contingent. Then, actually *nothing* would have been said, and nothing would happen. Or, it is necessary, and then it allows only to think of one type of the subject, namely that one that realises the necessary contingency. One life, one subject. At this point one can make a different use of the well-known argument of retroactivity: the absent multiplicity of the subject retroactively totalises the ontological ground on which it has been founded. The question would be, whether the conception of the subject as one retroactively turns the undecided ambiguity of the ontological ground into *one*.

Thus, Meillassoux's project reiterates the Kantian ambiguity on a deeper level: the point is not the undistinguishability (of life) in relation to nature, but the objective undistinguishability of the absolute itself. The subject emerging from this absolute nevertheless proves this absolute point to be *one*. Thus, if Kant's project and its followers can be said to imply a vitalist overdetermination, Meillassoux's project presents the point zero of the vitalist-materialist threshold.⁴¹ But, of course, the question is then, whether the phenomenological-ontological equivalence is the real problem, because it proves to be an account of being as one. The notion of life is, precisely, the notion of the transition from the ontological to the phenomenological, this is why it was so interesting for Kant, and this also why it reappears in any account of this

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41 Meillassoux takes a firm standpoint against vitalism, but he unites vitalism and idealism, because in the last instance vitalism for Meillassoux is part of the absolutization of thought. See Meillassoux 2008, p. 51, and Meillassoux 2012, p. 3, where he invents the term „subjectalism (...) to encompass at once all forms of idealism and all forms of vitalism.“

transition.

If this is true, then it would follow that in any case a theory of the subject is needed which does not retroactively turn the ontology into a given one. One option for this is a theory that intervenes as a supplement, as in Žižek's conception outlined above. Psychoanalysis here points out: a materialism without an object is not given. *It is precisely a claim upon that which is not given.* Against this, the notion of life presents the option of the non-given as appearing in the given. Life is undecided and undistinguishable. If ideology is the theory of closure, then life might present the most refined closure possible. Against this, we could say that a materialism of the subjective supplement subtracts itself from the given, while a claim that is oriented towards the given necessarily has to fall back into the claim of a stability of the process between ontology and phenomenology. A supplement against the ideology of life is needed – for a theoretical conception of life.

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The function of philosophy and the crisis of Marxism

Agon Hamza

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to reconstruct the function of philosophy in the times of the crisis. It aims to do so by drawing primarily from the work of Louis Althusser. By reconstructing Althusser's theses in our predicament, this article sets in the defence of philosophy against the current anti-intellectual trends. From this perspective this article also aims at drawing lines of demarcations between the current positions within the political Left.

Keywords:

Althusser, philosophy, Marxism, crisis, class struggle, ideology, Christianity.

Un concept ne s'abandonne pas comme un chien
– Althusser

What is the function of philosophy today? Can we talk about a philosophical thinking, whose primary function relies not only on theorisation as interpretation of the existing social order, but in the sense of marking or creating a point of rupture with the positive order of being? In other words, what is the duty of a critical philosopher: to simply interpret and provide an analysis of what is going on today in politics, economy, culture, sciences; or is his duty to break with the existing social fantasy, and its constitutive “chain,” and reorient ourselves in thought, with regard to the fundamental fantasy? To formulate this in a more simplified way: the duty of philosophy is to reorient ourselves beyond the current coordinates of our world as it is.

Let's begin with Louis Althusser, whose definitions of philosophy signify the shifts of his philosophical trajectory.¹ Althusser's first definition of philosophy was formulated under the epistemological horizon: *philosophy is a theory of theoretical practice*. It is important to argue that the triad that constitutes the problematic points of

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¹ Althusser of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* was operating under Bachelard's formula of the epistemological break. He would later abandon these premises, but nevertheless, his project was operating under the premises of a 'rupture' between his different philosophical periods. As Balibar put it: “The is an epistemological break, in Marx or elsewhere...perhaps nowhere else than in Althusser himself”, Balibar 1994: 157

Althusser's project – which he is in a perpetual struggle with – are Hegel², Christianity and epistemology. To a certain degree, these are the fields in which Althusser began his life as a philosopher. For now, we will be content in arguing that after his “epistemological period” Althusser continuously struggled in providing a different conception of philosophy, as an attempt to de-epistemologise it by providing an ontological framework, which culminates in his ‘late writings’. His posthumous works bear witness to the fact that Althusser became aware that materialism could not be only epistemologically upheld, but, rather, needs an ontological framework as its grounding. In other words, every materialism is dependent on ontological grounds, which will determine the nature of the former. Althusser's de-epistemologisation of philosophy, which in my view begins with his distancing from the above-mentioned definition and conception of philosophy, can be read also as the beginning of his attempt to create an ontological framework, which much later on, will culminate in his “aleatory materialist” period.³ In his “self-criticism period”, however, Althusser proposes a different formula, “philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory,”⁴ which will remain his final conception of philosophy.

Let us try to get the matters straight, at least in a provisional level,⁵ especially with regard to the inconspicuous words “in the last instance.” According to Althusser, because of “its abstraction, its rationality and its system,” philosophy is indexed in the “field of theory,” that is to say, philosophy is a theoretical⁶ discipline, but it exists in a specific set of conditions. We shall not go into this now, but it is important to note that these conditions are: politics and science. In other words, these are the material conditions of life, and of the production of knowledge. Therefore, philosophy maintains an intimate relation with the *ideologies* that express a given class tendency. From this, we can move towards

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² I want to argue that despite his abandonment of Hegel, Althusser, nevertheless, couldn't succeed in abandoning the Hegelian problematic *tout court*. The spectre of Hegel remains in and plays an important role in the work of Althusser. I shall not address this issue in this paper.

³ Althusser's translator G.M. Goshgarian argues that “Althusser presents the materialism of the encounter under another name in a March 1976 lecture, ‘The Transformation of Philosophy’”, Goshgarian 2006: xvi. One of the main questions with regard to Althusser's late period is, whether the previous phases of his philosophical project can be read from the lenses of “aleatory materialism.”

⁴ Althusser 2008: 67

⁵ I develop this in length on my dissertation thesis (unpublished manuscript).

⁶ For an analysis of Althusser's formulation of the theory, see Badiou, 2013

a provisional Althusserian-informed definition of ideology. Ideology is an oddish mixture of notions derived from science, with specific class interests; therefore, it is an oddish mix of the two conditions of philosophy. The class tendencies of *ideologies* are always *practical ideologies*.⁷ Taking all this into account, the “last instance” becomes clearer: it designates “determination in the last instance.” That is, ‘in the last instance’ refers to the material and determinant support, out of which the effective resources of philosophy derive. Philosophy, albeit autonomous in the last instance, as Althusser would put it, is defined by marking a division, or a position, in relation to its very non-philosophical substratum.

Let us go on, and try to examine this position through the opus of Althusser himself. If ‘philosophy is a class struggle in the field of theory,’ then this means that the philosopher, insofar as s/he is a Marxist, must “occupy a proletarian class position in philosophy,” in which the “political difficulty is ‘*determinant*’ in the last instance.”⁸ Let's leave this aside for the time being. Althusser is very careful to over-emphasise that philosophy is *not* simply a class struggle in theory, but it is such *only* in the last instance. He evokes Lenin, who has distinguished between three forms of struggle: the political, economic and theoretical form. These struggles have to be carried out by the proletariat, and “when it is fought out in the political field, the concentrated class struggle is called philosophy.”⁹ The complication begins here: his insistence that philosophy as a class struggle, in the domain of theory, produces effects in social practices (political, economic, ideological, scientific, etc). This is a pure military, or combative character, of Althusser's conception of philosophy. Not only in its character, but it has a militaristic nature in its function as such. Philosophy intervenes theoretically in different social practices, but mostly and predominantly in the scientific and political practices. Two complementary theses should be put forward here:

Philosophy intervenes politically, in theoretical form, which is to say that it “never intervenes directly, but only by way of ideology;”¹⁰ and

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⁷ It is worth mentioning that Althusser distinguishes between *practical* and *theoretical* ideologies. The latter are always “in the last instance “detachments” of the practical ideologies in the theoretical field”, Althusser 2008: 67-68/3n, Althusser 1990: 83.

⁸ Althusser 2001: 3

⁹ Ibid.,: 68

¹⁰ Althusser 2006: 254

in doing so, The decisive moment for Marxism is that “it represents a position in philosophy”.

Even though the implications of these two theses are far-reaching, and indeed too complicated to be elaborated in a paper of this length I will limit myself, however, to its basic effects both in politics and in philosophy. With this in mind, we can argue that philosophy, as a discipline, doesn't engage directly in a class struggle as such; in the sense that it is neither the object of the class struggle, nor it is its agent in any sense of the word. The paradoxical position of Althusser is that, although philosophy *is* class struggle, it is so *only in the last instance*, which means that, it has a specific function within the class struggle: that of drawing lines of demarcations, registering the effects of political struggle through giving them the proper name, et cetera. To make the first encapsulation of this, in a schematic way, we could say that: 1) both philosophy and ideology are conditioned by science and politics, and 2) philosophy only intervenes through ideology. This puts us in a position to ask a few crucial questions:

What is the difference between what philosophy and ideology take from these conditions, especially since the relation between the two is not always clearly demarcated, and

What does it mean to intervene on ideology in a non-ideological way?

These two questions require a long elaboration, which cannot be done in the format of this paper, so we will provide only a few preliminary and provisional theses. Here we encounter a problem, which is presented in the form of the distinction between intervention, division and delimitation. Is philosophy a matter of delimiting a boundary, after which all we get is ideology, or is the field it divides not necessarily divided between the scientific and ideological? In this sense, is it possible to conceive of the relation between science and ideology in another way than that of a boundary? Here, we can argue that since science is full of holes and true problems, it is ideology that covers them up. But, it is only through the philosophical intervention that these problems appear as problematic points. Yes, this is another view. It is also very important to analyse the extent to which this very concept is ideological in itself. That is to say, to which extend – if at all – the conviction that philosophy demarcates between what is ideological

and scientific, is ideological itself. Finally, if and when we divide the scientific from the ideological, we have to face yet another problem: what have we done politically? In other words, how is it that, by affecting one of its conditions, philosophy also affects the other? The fact that ideology “binds” the two conditions (what we have called as an “oddish” mix) holds the key to the explanation of this whole phenomenon.

But, let us move further. Philosophy is not interested in the so-called real life, or any political development as such.¹¹ It is interested, and it only registers, therefore it only thinks about the results and the effects of, emancipatory politics, its successes, as well as its failures. In Althusser's understanding, philosophy thinks only the Marxist-Leninist politics. In other words, this relation can be articulated as following: philosophy is preoccupied, in the last instance, not with thinking the present as such (description), but with intervening negatively, through demarcations, in it (prescriptive). It is this that Althusser has in mind when he designates philosophy as a class struggle in the realm of theory. This provides yet another complication. According to him, in the capitalist social formation, class struggle is the name of politics. And this is very important for Althusser's conception of philosophy. But, we should remember that politics is one of the two conditions of philosophy. Althusser adds: philosophy does exist in those situations in which social classes and sciences exist.¹² In other words, philosophy is strictly conditioned by the existence of class struggle, carried out in political domain and scientific discoveries.¹³ The non-philosophical conditions of philosophy in the Althusserian project, thus, are: science and politics, which in different periods of his project, take different positions. First, we have the primacy of science, whereas in Althusser's 'Maoist period', politics takes the primacy (“put politics in the commanding post”). However, elsewhere, Althusser insists that one condition cannot overtake the other one:

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11 Although, Althusser used to say that “Are we not always in exceptional situations?”, Althusser 1969: 104

12 Althusser 2014: 13

13 However, in late period of his work, in his famous interview with Fernanda Navaro, when Althusser was asked about ‘what does philosophy do’, he responded as following: “It may seem that philosophy inhabits a separate, remote world. Yet it acts, in a very special way: *at a distance*. It acts, by way of the ideologies, on real, concrete practices - for example, on cultural practices such as the sciences, politics, the arts and even psychoanalysis” Althusser 2006: 280. Here it is very important to recall Alain Badiou's four truth procedures as conditions of philosophy.

The rightist deviation suppresses philosophy: only science is left (positivism). The leftist deviation suppresses science: only philosophy is left (subjectivism). There are 'exceptions' to this (cases of 'inversion'), but they 'confirm' the rule.¹⁴

Let us take the theoretical deviations in theory, which are of interest of this paper. According to Althusser, theoretical deviations in politics are always of philosophical character: "these deviations are called economism, evolutionism, voluntarism, humanism, empiricism, dogmatism, etc. Basically, these deviations are *philosophical* deviations, and were denounced as philosophical deviations by the great workers' leaders, starting with Engels and Lenin."¹⁵ How should we understand this, from the perspective of his definition of philosophy? The way we should read Althusser's formula, thus, can be elaborated as following:

Class struggle exists apart from, and independently of, philosophy, but its effects can be named, marked and classified only by philosophy.

Although philosophy is, in the last instance, a class struggle in the field of theory, it doesn't take an active part in class struggle, but it produces theoretical effects in politics.

Philosophy states propositions are *Theses*,¹⁶ which should be understood as positions; that is to say, philosophy operates by stating dogmatic propositions that, once stated, take the form of the *Theses*.

By operating through *Theses*, which are positions, philosophy's function *in the* class struggle becomes clear: it takes the proletarian class position, in the realm of theory. Philosophy has an intervening aspect, by which Althusser means intervening through demarcating between "the ideological of the ideologies on the one hand, and the scientific of the sciences on the other."¹⁷ In this sense, philosophy exists and operates, or rather its place is in between the practices in which it intervenes (scientific, ideological, political) and the results or effects of its intervention.

Drawing from all this, we can argue that, for Althusser himself,

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14 Althusser 2001: 3

15 Althusser 2001: 26

16 Althusser 1990: 74

17 Ibid., 83.

philosophy is constituted in its intervention. That is to say, philosophy is constituted through theoretical intervention, *by the means of ideology*, in certain realities, by producing effects in those domains, which retroactively condition the transformation of philosophy itself.

Marking divisions

There is such a thing as a genuine philosophical laughter. It is usually caused by the word "communication", or debate. Deleuze was certainly right to argue that philosophy "has a horror of discussions. It always has something else to do. Debate is unbearable to it, but not because it is too sure of itself. On the contrary, it is its uncertainties that take it down other, more solitary paths."¹⁸ Or, as he puts it elsewhere, philosophy is not about dialogue, but it is about constructing a problem, a problem-position.¹⁹ Constructing a problem-position is, in itself, a position which divides. Althusser argues that it is science that unites without any division, but philosophy divides, and the unification can come only by division. Therefore, "there is no such thing as philosophical communication, no such thing as philosophical discussion."²⁰ In this regard, every philosophical premise is that a true idea doesn't unite, but it divides.

In a nutshell, these can be said to be the two primary functions of philosophy, as conceived by Althusser; namely: philosophy intervenes precisely not in every-day life, but rather with regard to the determination in last instance; and since it has an intervening character, it maintains an authoritarian relations with regard to its (non-philosophical) conditions. Hence, dialogue, debate and other democratic categories are foreign to philosophy, if not enemies.

At this point, we should make a leap forward in this direction. We all know Hegel's famous sentence on the owl of Minerva that takes off at dusk – the famous paragraph which has been appropriated by the *common-sense philosophy*, as Althusser would have said. It is more often quoted than it is read, as is too often the case with Hegel's philosophy in general. According to Hegel, philosophy performs its function only too late; that is to say, philosophy appears when "actuality has gone through

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18 Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 29

19 Deleuze 1987: 1

20 Althusser 2001: 13

its formative process.”²¹Philosophy intervenes when and where the figure of consciousness has grown old. In Hegel’s words:

This lesson of the concept is necessarily also apparent from history, namely that it is only when actuality has reached maturity that the ideal appears opposite the real and reconstructs this real world, which it has grasped in its substance, in the shape of an intellectual realm. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.²²

These two positions are not contradictory: if philosophy is a discipline whose working hours begin after everything else is at sleep, it is also dependent on what happens in the social field during the day.

However, Althusser himself wouldn’t agree with this assessment. He would argue that:

A philosophy does not make its appearance in the world as Minerva appeared to the society of Gods and men. It only exists in so far as it occupies a position, and it only occupies this position in so far as it has conquered it in the thick of an already occupied world.²³

The problem is that Althusser is repeating Hegel’s words. Hegel does not advocate the position of a beautiful soul, which is to say, a philosopher who occupies a position of an observer. If philosophy starts off at night, it does so only after a long day of experiments in different social domains. It introduces new divisions in the social fields, by which it is immanently conditioned. Along this line, in the same passage, Hegel explicitly says that philosophy should not propose anything to its conditions, the ‘experiments’ are done within the conditions, not extrinsically, with any sort of positive philosophical character. It should be noted that he also complained about Fichte mingling in political, and Plato with love. But, this is altogether another history. However, it brings

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21 Hegel 1991: 23

22 Hegel 1991: 23

23 Althusser 1990: 205

us to a crucial thesis: *Philosophy has not always existed*.²⁴

The existence and transformation of Philosophy seem to bear a close relation to the *conjunction* of important events in the class relations and the state, on the one hand, and the history of the sciences on the other.²⁵

Here we encounter an obvious dichotomy: temporal versus structural. We have the conception of philosophy that intervenes *theoretically* in the existing conjunctures, as well as the other conception, of a philosopher as a night-time warden. The initial solution could be formulated as following: in Althusser’s world, philosophy intervenes late at night, after a long day of class struggle, of scientific discoveries. Here, we are again confronted with the question of the transformation of philosophy, a question with which Althusser was confronted throughout his philosophical carrier. In 1976, Althusser presented a paper entitled *The Transformation of Philosophy*,²⁶ which in my view, should be read alongside his *Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy*.²⁷

New, and profound, scientific discoveries and new, major events or modifications in the relations of and of the class struggle, produce such profound effects that they necessitate the transformation of the philosophy as such. The latter is not dependent on the inspiration of an author, or his/her epiphany. How should a philosopher, who is also a Marxist, continue his/her job? Althusser wrote that “Marxism - Marxist theory and Marxist philosophy - forms part of our culture does not mean that it is integrated into it. On the contrary, Marxism (dis)functions in our culture, as an element and force of division.”²⁸ The situation with Marxism today is far more problematic. It is not only that Marxism represents the toxic element, not only in our cultures, but also in philosophy and theory generally. In accordance with Althusser’s thesis, we should propose another conception of Marxism and understand it as a major force of division not only in our cultures, but also in all social domains as such (politics, science, ideologies, etc.). The complications

.....
24 Althusser 2014: 17

25 Ibid.

26 Althusser 1990: 241-266

27 Ibid., 203-240

28 Althusser 1999: 243

streaming out of this can be formulated in a few theses. The impression that we can get is that philosophy's conditions *divide* philosophy; that is to say that the novelties of a certain time change philosophy, which in turn, intervenes on the fields which condition it. However, it is precisely this "virtuous circle" aspect that made Althusser ever so worried about revisionisms, because revisionism uses the same circuit, but rather than using the novelties in the conditions to divide philosophy, which, renewed by these cuts, then cuts through the ideological dimension of what conditioned it. Further, revisionism uses its conditions to "fix" philosophy, and a unified philosophy to 'fix' the gaps in its conditions. But, the circuit is the same (from conditions to philosophy, and back to conditions), and this is a reason why revisionisms are always a threat!

How to begin with a critique

Althusser's early writings constitute the immanent tension between religion (or, Roman-Catholic Church) and Marxism, which, in his later work, will be replaced with the tension between philosophy and Marxism (or, Communism). The story is well known: Althusser was a devoted Catholic. His intellectual course begins with Catholicism, under the influence of his friend Jean Guilton, a Catholic priest who was, perhaps, the most important person in Althusser's intellectual formation. Althusser remained a Catholic for the rest of his life, even after joining the French Communist Party. What did change, was his relation to the Church, which he "abandoned in 1947 or thereabouts." However, he maintained a kind of fidelity to Catholicism: at the moment of apostasy, Althusser did not reject God or Christianity,²⁹ but rejected the Church. This is a rather unknown Althusser, much less explored or studied, and all too often repressed, even by the most fanatical partisans of Althusser. However, not many can deny that significant theological factors appear in his later work. What is of crucial interest here is the abruptness of his turn from the theological works to the first orthodox Marxist texts, which, in the later period, is almost the dialectical Other of what seems to be a continuation even after abandonment. In this regard, Roland Boer is right to argue that "if the thesis on Hegel and 'The International of Decent Feelings' are unabashedly theological, then 'A Matter of Fact' and 'On Conjugal Obscenity' fall clearly into

.....
 29 Louis Althusser: l'approdo al comunismo, available online at: <http://www.filosofia.rai.it/articoli/louis-althusser-lapprodo-al-comunismo/5318/default.aspx>

ecclesiology."³⁰

The abandonment of Church poses an important and also an interesting, theoretical moment: Althusser became a "Communist because he was a Catholic":

I did not change faith, I found that.... it is possible to say that I remained Christian deep down, I don't go to church, but what does the church stand for/mean today? You don't ask people to go to church these days, don't u?

I remained a catholic, i.e. a universalist, internationalist, no? I thought that in the communist party there were means more adequate to realize the universal fraternity³¹

What Althusser says here is that, in his conviction, Communism is Christianity realised with different means. This is *the* crucial point, because it poses two important philosophical and political implications: 1) the status, and the role, of Church in the struggle for emancipation, and 2) the materialism in, and of, Christianity. But, even a more important aspect to Althusser's Christian writings is, as Stanislas Breton points out, that "without his catholic education during his youth movements, it is possible and probable that Althusser, and not only him, would have never reached the 'path of thinking', and we add: Marxist thinking."³² In this sense, Breton's analysis, and Boer's thesis that "Althusser's expulsion of the Church

from his life and work enabled the Church to permeate all of his work,"³³ – should be read together. Christianity, or more precisely Catholicism, is the 'condition of possibility' for Althusser to engage with, and become, a Marxist, while at the same time it constitutes an obstacle that has to be overcome. But, before overcoming it, Roman-Catholicism provided the framework for the universal emancipation. That is to say, the alliance between Christianity and Marxism offer the conceptual and political framework for universal emancipation.

This is the problematic that haunts Althusser in the beginning of

.....
 30 Boer 2009: 110

31 Althusser: l'approdo al comunismo

32 Breton 1997: 155

33 Boer 2009: 108a

his philosophical life.

However, the most important question regarding Althusser's philosophical project is that of Hegel: why did he abandon Hegel, and became a Spinozist? The first thesis concerns the philosophical and political conjuncture in the post-war France. According to Althusser, "the fact that, for the last two decades, Hegel has had his place in French bourgeois philosophy is not a matter to be treated lightly."³⁴ The philosophical conjuncture in France, or "extraordinary philosophical chauvinism" or as Althusser characterised it, was dominated by phenomenologists, *Lebensphilosophie*, and a bourgeois appropriation of Hegel. The return to Hegel, in the post-war period, took a specific form:

Great Return to Hegel is simply a desperate attempt to combat Marx, cast in the specific form that revisionism takes in imperialism's final crisis: *a revisionism of a fascist type*.³⁵

Politically, the post-war reaction was at its highest. Philosophical chauvinism was accompanied by political provincialism, or revisionism. The systematic political critique was alienated into the usual moralistic blackmailing terms. In fact, the political revisionism was centred on the category of *fear*, as developed by the central figures of post-war writings: Camus, Malraux, Marcel, and others. By employing the notion of fear to analyse the political situation in France, they became Fukuyama-ists *avant la lettre*.

Against all these currents, in which the philosophical categories were used as a warrant for the most reactionary elements in the post-war situation, Althusser seeks refuge in the philosophy of Spinoza. In the post-war predicament, in which the philosophical currents were dominated by a bourgeois appropriation of Hegel and phenomenologists (Marxists or not), Spinozism was indeed perceived as a liberator from that reactionary conjuncture, and being a Spinozist in philosophy was perceived as a liberating experience. We should remember that one of his main enemies, both philosophically and politically, was Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the author of a *Phenomenology of Perception*, together with Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Nevertheless, before arriving at this point, Althusser was a Hegelian, and this can be seen in his Thesis, and other essays, from that period.

.....
³⁴ Althusser 2014:177

³⁵ Ibid., 189

Taking all this into account, what characterises Althusser's early period is:

His full identification with Christianity and an attempt to create an alliance between Roman-Catholicism and Marxism;

An underlying Hegelian framework, albeit a humanist Hegel, is present in his work, culminating in his Masters thesis and *The Return to Hegel*;

A constant attempt to dissolve his theoretical alliances and build a new philosophical framework for his philosophical project, which culminates with abandonment of Christianity and Hegel.

The shift in Althusser's position is evident: from identifying with Christianity, and referring to himself as a Christian ("we Christians..."), he switches to dismissing religion as a "practical ideology."³⁶ On another level, he switches from an interesting defence of Hegel against the fascist revisionism, to dismissing Hegel as the philosophical rationalisation of the existing state of things. In the midst of these conceptual shifts, he is continuously faced with the perplexing question: how to begin with a Critique? In the whole of his oeuvre, we can distinguish between its Christian and scientific perspective. Differently put, Althusser's critique is grounded first on Christian universality, or more precisely, based on his mastery of attempting to ground the critique in its Universalist Catholic fashion, Althusser opens up the space for two decisive moves in his philosophical and political life: a) paradoxically (or not so much), it was Christianity that enabled him to reject/abandon the Roman-Catholic Church, and b) it enables him to rethink Marxism in universal terms.

Broadly put, the principal question with regard to religion, and its relation to Marxism, is not whether they can they co-exist together, without submitting one to another: the tradition of *Liberation Theology* has proven to us that it is possible to suture Marxism and Christianity. However, the main question is, is it possible to be a materialist (or, a Marxist) without going through religious opus. Or, even better: is it possible to be a materialist (and in this case, a Marxist) by abandoning religion as an idealist enterprise?

With regard to Althusser's early writings, one should complement Boer's distinction of his work, by arguing that the structure

.....
³⁶ See also Althusser 2014: 194-197

of Althusser's theological writings can be compared to Marx's famous statement:

the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*.³⁷

This structure of this thesis is materialised in Althusser's own theological writings: his criticism of fear, the proletariat of fear or of the human condition, the status and the structure of Church, etc. Along with its critique of ideology, in these essays one can (and should) seek to reconstruct the already existing materialist tendencies in Althusser's work³⁸. Thus, in *On the Materialist Dialectic*, he writes that

Instead of the ideological myth of a philosophy of origins and its organic concepts, Marxism establishes in principle the recognition of the givenness of the complex structure of any concrete 'object', a structure which governs both the development of the object and the development of the theoretical practice which produces the knowledge of it. There is no longer any original essence, only an ever-pre-givenness, however far knowledge delves into its past.³⁹

The safest path to follow, with regard to this, would be to analyse this from the perspective of his 'aleatory materialist' period, by employing concepts of the void, encounter, etc. in his *On Genesis*, Althusser already talks about "the schema of the "theory of the encounter" or theory of "conjunction," which is meant to replace the ideological (religious) category of genesis, there is a place for what can

37 Marx 2008: 10

38 A strange encounter can be traced with Feuerbach, the embodiment of theoretical humanism, whom Althusser translated and studied thoroughly. In his *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach argues that the best way to pursue the query of the essence of Christianity is through embracing the idea that God has created the world *ex nihilo*. According to him, this non-essentialist thesis, expresses the value of this world for the Christian consciousness. Feuerbach argues that if "creation is a product of the Will", which is not the "will of the reason, but the will of imagination", that is to say, the subjective Will, then the world as it is, carries the value of nothingness. "Thus, writes Feuerbach, the nothingness of the world expresses the power of the will.", Feuerbach 2008: 85, see Hamza 2015 (forthcoming)

39 Althusser 2005: 198-9

be called linear genealogies."⁴⁰ In other words, according to him, the structure can be thought only as an effect of 'conjunction', and each element that comes to be combined in the conjunction of (a given) the structure (i.e. water, swimming, drowning), are in itself, a product or rather an effect as such. In other words, Althusser here is talking about the structure without a cause, which will remain a major problem in his entire philosophical and political project. That is to say, how, and whether, it is possible to think the rupture or the historical revolution within the "limits" of the structure, or the transformation of the social, political, ideological structure as such. Here, Althusser is positioning himself against Hegel, especially with his concept of "expressive causality."⁴¹ The importance of pointing this out relies on the attention we should pay to Althusser's own development of his critical theory in the context of religion/theology. Here we can say that his intervention is a good example of what we meant before by the function of philosophy.

In *The International of Decent Feelings*, Althusser sets himself to polemicise against Christian apocalyptic readings of the (then) contemporary texts that attempted to read the predicament of the beginning of the Cold War. The fear of atomic bombs as a consequence of the Cold War was indeed real, but "proletarianization" of the people ("we are all victims") from all classes of the social whole didn't convince Althusser. The Marxist side of Althusser comes to say that such a generalisation of the "proletariat" as a class in the general population is, in fact, a negation of the specificity of the proletarian class position, as well as the specific contradiction of the political, economic, and ideological struggle of the proletariat against dominating classes. The threat of the atomic bomb cannot be used as an excuse of the every day exploitation of the proletarians and the other poor.⁴² In the same text, Althusser polemicises against the then-prevailing discourses on the equality of all the people in front of their misery, guilt, poverty and the alienation of the human condition. All the subjects, despite their class position, equally experience this. According to Althusser, this discourse replaces the recognition of our equality before God, with our equality before our fear of death, atomic threats, etc. In Althusser's perspective, this position is anti-Christian on two levels. It favours idolatry (our

40 Althusser 2012: 1

41 For a critique of Althusser's critique of Hegel, see, especially, Žižek 1993: 135-140

42 Althusser 2014: 31

death equals us with God), and it fails to recognise the existence of the proletariat, whose emancipation cannot be accomplished by re-appropriating the products of human labour, which has been encapsulated by the feeling of fear.

Doesn't this hold true today with regard to ecological catastrophes, new forms of exclusion, new forms of (neo)imperial and (neo)colonial administrations, racisms, and other forms of exploitation? We should forget our social status and our class position, suspend the class identification, so they tell us, because the threats we are facing are real and serious. The ruling ideology tells us that, against all the threats, humanity should unify against the secondary divisions which might endanger the future of humanity. The usual response to a philosopher who brings up the question of a class struggle is a 'reminder' of a terrorist or ecological threats, accompanied by the evocation of "humanity" as a whole. Althusser was faced with a similar overload of "humanist cry".

And, against all the odds of humanity as a totality, Althusser writes that "we have only one recourse left, they bluntly tell us, in the face of catastrophe: an holy alliance against destiny."⁴³ In the aftermath of World War II, it was fashionable to read in the apocalyptic manner the situation through signs,

"the war itself becomes both sin and God's wrathful punishment, the concentration camps are the Last Judgment, the Moscow trials are the Passion, the atomic bomb is the will of God, and the equality of death before the bomb is equivalent to equality before God"⁴⁴

Against this, Althusser takes a Marxist, as well as theological, position, as Boer rightly argues. The notions of the "proletariat of fear" and the "proletariat of the human condition," are the new names that attempt to reduce, and then replace, the old proletariat by the new. The widespread idea that all the people are threatened by the fear of the atomic bomb would equate them with Marx's, and the Marxist, notion of the exploited majority. The attempt to encompass everyone – people of all social classes – into the proletariat of wear or human condition,

.....
43 Ibid.p.23

44 Boer 2007:471

is a masterful endeavour of ideological manipulation by the people of the ruling class to obliterate the political and economic nature of the proletariat, and therefore the class struggle. The fear, as a psychological condition, does not change the status of the exploitation that takes place every day, and the poverty that comes as a consequence. In the same place, Althusser argues against the newly emerging prophets and their preaching on what he calls as "moralizing socialism".⁴⁵ When he warns against the prophets, he takes a clearly Christian position, that is, the struggle against idolatry:

This false end of the world is teeming with false prophets who announce false Christ's and treat an event as the Advent. But Christ has taught us that we must beware of false prophets, and also that they will reappear as the Last Days draw nigh. The paradox is plain: the end that is close for every Christian is not the end of the false prophets of history.⁴⁶

This paragraph is obviously drawn from the Bible, or more precisely from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In the gospel according to Saint Luke, verse 21:5-6 states "and as some spake of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and gifts, he said, As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down", whereas Matthew, in verse 24:5-8, says that "For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: ... and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows." In a complete harmony with warnings of Mark and Luke,⁴⁷ Althusser, from a firm Christian position against the idolatry, takes this form: "when we merely invoke the Lord, we serve, not the Lord we invoke, but another whom we do not."⁴⁸ In short, this is the tension that arises in Althusser's position between that of a Marxist and a Christian Catholic. In this regard, Althusser's position is "divided into two": 1) as a Christian, he struggles against idolatry and false prophets

.....
45 Althusser 2014: 31

46 Ibid., :28

47 But this would hold for Saint Paul as well, who warned "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears. And they shall turn away their ears from the truth." (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

48 Ibid, p.30.

(epitomised in the concept of the “fear”) and 2) as a Marxist, he struggles against the “moralizing socialism” which is represented in the discourse of “socialism without a class struggle”. In his double-position of a Marxist and Catholic, there is a clear tension, which is rendered visible in the relation of the proletariat and the class struggle, on which Boer is right to argue that:

is not Althusser’s Marxist argument (concern with the proletariat) in conflict with his Christian argument (idolatry must be avoided)? The problem is that, although he says his position is a properly Christian one free from idolatry, putting one’s trust in the proletariat become precisely the idolatry he identified earlier. The tension between class and idolatry in this essay is a specific example of the deeper one between Christian and Marxist positions.⁴⁹

Drawing from this, we can argue that Althusser’s early Christian texts render palpable the constitutive and immanent tension between theology and religion. It should be said that here we are extracting a “genealogy” of Althusser’s theory of idea as division. But, before getting into this, I want to recapitulate Althusser’s idea as developed in his writings. The distinction between the proletariat of fear, and human condition versus the laboring proletariat, can also be explained through the background of the lines from Matthew: “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). Jesus Christ, here, is at his Maoist best: the true idea does not unite, but it divides. That is to say, the true radical idea does not unite the people, but it sets up a violent line of demarcation between the people and its enemies. The unity of the people, despite their class position, is the dream of every fascist. To formulate this in a Maoist fashion, we should not opt for the unification of the social whole (under the name of the *proletarian of human condition* or *fear*, after World War II; whereas, today it applies for the terrorist threats, ecological catastrophes, etc), but for drawing lines of demarcations, between antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions among the people. This is the true effect of the radical idea.

Class division and its constitution

One of the main preoccupations of the contemporary Left is that of

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49 Boer 2007: 471

the unification of the masses, classes, or people, as such. Recall the beginning of the on-going financial crisis in which, apart from articulating and theorising the fatal consequences of the crisis, the Left was almost equally concerned about the fact that the society is split into two or more parts. If we rely on Althusser’s conception of philosophy as a division, we should read it from a Žižekian perspective; that is to say, it means that a philosopher, should by definition, take sides. In other words, when the philosopher registers the effects of the class struggle, he does not occupy the position of the *beautiful soul*, deciding from a distance what is worthy of thinking and what is not, but he/she is engaged in the given struggles. What philosophy, or a Marxist philosopher, does when he is engaged in a class struggle, is that they register what is, as such, universal in that very struggle. A good reference here is Badiou’s “Idea of communism,” by which he means that it is a matter of elevating the singular dimension of politics to the universal level which would allow others, not clearly affected by that political project, to see the demarcation that such politics produces in the world, between the truth and the state.⁵⁰ Therefore, the universal validity of a struggle and practical engagement are not, in the final instance, mutually exclusive: as Žižek continuously repeats, the access to objective truth cannot be reached if one adopts a position outside of the struggle. According to him, the great dialectical paradox is that, it is only through an engaged position that one can access the universal truth.

How are we to understand this? Hegel argues that, in order to have a dialectical understanding of an object, we need to demonstrate the opposite determinations of the very object that we analyse, in order to seize the opposed moments in their unity. In doing so, we demonstrate that every Whole is a unity of its opposed determinations.⁵¹ Hegel’s statement that “the True is the whole”⁵² should be read together with (at least one) other statement, this time from the end of his *Phenomenology*, where he writes that “the self- knowing Spirit knows not only itself but also the negative of itself, or its limit.”⁵³ For Hegel, knowing one’s

.....
50 For more on this and comparison with Žižek’s conception of communism, see Hamza 2014 (forthcoming).

51 For instance, see Žižek 2012: 292-304; McGowan 2013: 31-37

52 Hegel 1977: 11

53 Ibid., 492.

limit equals self-sacrifice, which is “the externalization in which Spirit displays the process of its becoming Spirit in the form of *free contingent happening*.”⁵⁴ How should we read this, bearing in mind that the Absolute Knowledge is the very concept that turned Hegel into the enemy of almost the entire post-Hegelian era? In a Žižekian-inspired move, we can argue that Hegel’s Absolute stands for the exact opposite of its standard understanding. The Absolute Knowing is not a stage in which the social, political, and other, antagonisms are obliterated; thus, there is a harmonious social whole, a happy and organic functioning of a given community:

the Hegelian totality is not the ideal of an organic Whole, but a critical notion – to locate a phenomenon in its totality does not mean to see the hidden harmony of the Whole, but to include in a system all its “symptoms;’ antagonisms, and inconsistencies as integral parts.⁵⁵

It is this excess that should be counted as intrinsic, constitutive of the Whole, which will allow us to recognise and account for that which the Absolute is supposed to enclose: the antagonisms which are inherent of the social order itself. This is the fundamental lesson of Hegel’s notion of totality: no matter how advanced a given social order is, it cannot overcome its inherent antagonisms that are structurally necessary. For Hegel, the achievement of the Absolute is in fact the recognition of the inevitability of antagonisms as such. Taking this into account, how can we read the classes, and the class struggle in general? In other words, is it possible to account for them separately? According to Althusser, it is not, because “the class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing.”⁵⁶ For Althusser, the class division does not come later, but it is the class struggle which constitutes the division into classes. The exploitation of one class by another is already a class struggle, the minimum for the constitution of classes as such. And this is a central thesis in Althusser’s understanding of contradictions: class struggle precedes classes, which also implies that the class struggle is not a product of classes which previously existed in the social field. Following this, we should abandon the positivist

.....
54 Ibid.

55 Žižek 2012: 378

56 Althusser 2008: 82

understanding of classes, as positive and social groups, which exists independently of the class struggle.⁵⁷ We should understand class struggle as a historical form of the contradiction, which, by being inscribed in the mode of production, “divides classes into classes.” In other words, classes are constituted a posteriori, as a result of the class struggle.⁵⁸ Philosophically, “it affirms the *primacy of contradiction* over the *terms* of the contradiction.” Political implications of this thesis are also radical: we are pushed to accept a radical political and theoretical thesis: *society doesn’t exist*, “as a positive order of being.”⁵⁹ Althusser condemns the theoretical notion of ‘society’ as non-scientific:

This term is in fact fraught with moral, religious and legal overtones; in short, it is an ideological notion, that must be replaced by a scientific concept: the concept of ‘social formation’⁶⁰

In this regard, there are political consequences that have to be drawn. Far from being a Thatcherite position, the Thesis that ‘society doesn’t exist’ affirms the class struggle as a central category of any politics of emancipation. For Althusser, who followed Marx very closely in this respect, class struggle is the name for politics, which prevents the (all too often liberal) conception of classes as parts of a positive social body, and at the same time, in a Hegelian fashion, by being “categories of the real of a political struggle which cuts across the entire social body, preventing its “totalization.””⁶¹ The two (apparently) antagonistic positions that we have to accept are those that capitalism designates our horizon, and yet it is antagonistic in its nature. It is important to emphasise that Althusser is not as naïve as some of critics have argued, unaware of the (importance) of the “critique of value.” His position is just that, only from a perspective that is engaged with the class struggle, we can even discern the true objects of the critique

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57 An important aspect to be noted is that class struggle is always already there in every class society. With the violent turn of the class struggle, they become more apparent in the world.

58 Stanislas Breton makes an important analysis on the continuity in Althusser’s work, namely on the class struggle, primacy of relations of productions, and on aleatory materialism, see Breton 1993: 421.

59 Žižek 2011: 198

60 Althusser 2014: 19

61 Žižek 2011: 198

of political economy. He inverted the order: it is not that an economic analysis will really *convince* us of class struggle, it is the class struggle that demarcates the position from which the critique of political economy should be made. This also connects us back to the point on the influence of Christianity in his thought, not only the Bible passage about the sword (division), but also with another verse from the Bible: “I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me.” (Isaiah 65:1; which is, the engagement).

Pikkety-style Leftism

In the last part of this paper, I will use Piketty precisely as an example of what it means to analyse value and capital without an a priori engagement with class struggle as a “metaeconomic” hypothesis. In his *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx argues that

In the crises of the world market, the contradictions and antagonisms of bourgeois production are strikingly revealed. Instead of investigating the nature of the conflicting elements which erupt in the catastrophe, the apologists content themselves with denying the catastrophe itself and insisting, in the face of their regular and periodic recurrence, that if production were carried on according to the textbooks, crises would never occur. Thus the apologetics consist in the falsification of the simplest economic relations, and particularly in clinging to the concept of unity in the face of contradiction⁶²

Aren't we facing the same situation in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, in which the apologetics of capitalism put the blame not on the structural necessity of existing relations of productions to create crisis, but rather blame the irresponsible managers. Crises are the most important feature needed for the capitalist reproduction to take place. It is in the course of the crises that the inherent instabilities, antagonisms, and different forms of oppression and domination are reshaped, take a new form, and by which capitalism attempts to provide a new vision of itself for its future. In this regard, crises are not only inevitable, but as Marx has repeated many times, they are necessary for the inner contradictions of capitalism (accumulation) to be temporarily pacified. The crisis of capitalism is not, by itself, the potential for the beginning of

62 Marx, 1969: 500

something new, nor does it offer the perspective of the new vision of a different society. To formulate this in Badiou's terms, the crisis is not, by itself, a new figure in the situation. Or even better, crisis cannot be said to be *a priori* to an eventual site.

What we witness now, as the crisis goes on, is the attempt to revivify itself, albeit it is all too early to be able to account or predict what form and shape it will take. As David Harvey put it, “the manner of exit from one crisis contains within itself the seeds of crisis to come.”⁶³ Since the crisis exploded, we are witnessing a proliferation of diagnoses and proposals for solving the crisis, and its effects.

If we take all this into account, which is the ultimate horizon of today's Left, is it radical or not?

The publication of Thomas Piketty's *Capital for the Twenty-First Century* caused a storm in all ideological and political camps. Obviously, Piketty touched a weak point of the entire field in which the antagonistic ideological tendencies and orientations co-exists. The first problem with Piketty's book is that we are giving him too much credit and attention, by elevating his book to an undeserved level. In this sense, the reaction of the Left to his book is too symptomatic, in at least two levels. First, it is, as if by titling his book as he did, he attempted to re-write Marx's *Capital* for our century, which among the Marxists caused an outburst of anger. In fact, it is all too clear that this was not Piketty's intention at all.⁶⁴ Second, Piketty's book renders visible the limits of the contemporary Left, in the sense that we externalising our failure (in this case, to re-write Marx's *Capital*) into somebody who didn't even have that intention. We are all too often caught up in 'trendy' events, which leave no mark, or have no effect on, our project of emancipation. The best service that we, from the Left, could have done to the book is to have treated it as it deserves: an interesting Keynesian-informed book, which will turn into oblivion in a rather short period of time. Yet, Piketty deserves some attention not for what he has written, or what he stands for, but for the troubles he has caused. Hegel writes that “behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we go behind it ourselves, as much in order that we may see, as that there may be something behind there which

63 Harvey 2014: X

64 Piketty himself admitted that he has never really read Marx: “I never managed really to read it [Das Kapital]... the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 is a short and strong piece. *Das Kapital*, I think, is very difficult to read and for me it was not very influential”, Piketty 2014

can be seen.”⁶⁵ If we apply this to Piketty, the result is too obvious: there is nothing so mysterious about his work, it is always-already there; a Keynesian whose main point is to reform capitalism so that we give it a more human face. For example, in a Rawlsian manner, he argues that “inequality is not necessarily a bad in itself: the key question is to decide whether it is justified, whether there are reasons for it.”⁶⁶ He makes his point even clearer by arguing that

I have no interest in denouncing inequality or capitalism per se - especially since social inequalities are not in themselves a problem as long as they are justified, that is, ‘founded only upon common utility,’ as article I of the 1798 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen proclaims.⁶⁷

The horizon in which he operates is that of existing order. Further, Piketty is the best embodiment of what Žižek calls *utopia*. His project is utopian, not because of its solution (high progressive tax, etc.), but because its proposed measures cannot be applied in our world:

imagine a government doing this, Piketty is aware it needs to be done globally. Because if you do it in one country, then capital moves elsewhere. This is another aspect of his utopianism, my claim is that if you imagine a world organization where the measure proposed by Piketty can effectively be enacted, then the problems are already solved. Then already you have a total political reorganization, you have a global power which effectively can control capital, we already won.⁶⁸

If we want to push Piketty-ism a step further, we should also analyse the political situation of the Left in Europe. The victory of the Right, and the rise of neo-fascist parties in the European Parliamentary elections, is the best sign of the path towards which we are heading. But, what we should be concerned about is the weakness of the Left, which enabled the empowerment of the Right, and our terrible defeat. The ultimate problem of the Left today, is that it cannot dream beyond

65 Hegel 1977: 103

66 Piketty 2014: 19

67 Ibid., 31.

68 Žižek 2014.

capitalism as its terminal perspective. Politically, at least in Europe, the Left obviously cannot go further than a reformist political project, which functions under the name of Syriza. We are all aware of Syriza’s right turn, but what is more problematic than this,⁶⁹ is the disappearance of the word ‘capitalism’ from their vocabulary. But, this is not only a Syriza-phenomenon: most of the Left has abandoned the word capitalism, and instead we all like to talk about neoliberalism.⁷⁰ Badiou used to say that, the notion of democracy seems to be the organiser of consensus in our societies. However, with the new dynamics of global capitalism, democracy and capitalism do not seem to be any longer the ‘ideal couple.’ Today it can be said that democracy has been replaced by another notion, that of neoliberalism, which seems to have overtaken the function played by democracy, albeit in a different form. Although the two situate on different levels, paradoxically they play the same role. According to Badiou, there are (at least) two conceptions of democracies today: 1) the form of the State; that is to say, a State with its elections, its representatives, constitution, government, etc.; and 2) the other conception is that of the form of a popular or collective action: direct democracy, marches, riots, etc. While the first one is a norm, or an objective fact, the latter is more of a means for political engagement. In Badiou’s terminology, democracy is not a political truth in itself, but one of the means for finding or exploring it. Further, for Badiou, democracy functions as a structuring principle of what he refers to as “the West.” However, going back to the previous argument, Žižek maintains that capitalism no longer needs democracy, but capitalism it is moving towards a new mode of functioning; what he calls capitalism with Asian values, i.e. authoritarian state plus capitalism. In this sense, democracy is no longer the organiser of our consensus.⁷¹ Here comes

69 In a rather generous reading of their right turn, we can perhaps account it for a ‘tactical retreatment’ due to existing currents, etc.

70 Among a few others, it is Žižek and Badiou that didn’t succumb to the ‘trendy’ current of ‘theorising’ neoliberalism and forgetting about capitalism.

71 In her *The Communist Horizon*, Jodi Dean argues that the call for democracy is the correct move only in some particular historical settings, such as the French or Haitian revolution, or the political fight that lead to October Revolution. However, Dean argues that democracy is the right name for anti-colonial and anti-imperial political struggles, as well as in the opposition to authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, according to Dean, the emphasis on democracy, in our contemporary parliamentary democracies, equals defending of the status quo, “a call for more of the same”. In other words, “democracy is our ambient milieu, the hegemonic form of contemporary politics”. However, what Dean doesn’t seem to take into account is that at least until a couple of years ago, democracy has been appropriated by the neo-imperial administrators. Many neoimperial administrations have been installed in different countries precisely under the

neoliberalism, as an ideological proposition, which albeit differently from Badiou's conception of democracy today, neo-liberalism still regulates our political and ideological field, precisely by providing it with a level of consistency. We all love to hate it - all the ideological camps, from the far right to the far left, liberals, etc. The crucial point is to note that neoliberalism in fact does not have a stable or fixed meaning: it serves as a unifying or quilting point which establishes a consistent space within which different and antagonistic ideologies can oppose each other inconsequentially, fighting over who provides the best critique for a menace they themselves have defined.

What is the alternative to this? In their *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue that "virtually, no one, with the exception of a few allegedly archaic Marxists (an 'endangered species'), referred to capitalism any longer. The term was simply stuck from vocabulary of politicians, trade unionists, writers and journalists."⁷² However, today's "archaic Marxists" do not like the word "capitalism" very much; instead, we all like to talk about the calamities caused by neoliberalism, as well as to engage in a struggle against it. A hypothetically naïve question should be posed: if our struggle is successful and we manage to crash neoliberalism, what do we get as a result? A Piketty-style capitalism, socialism, or....?⁷³ We don't seem to have an answer to this question. Neoliberalism is no longer a critical notion, but an ideological category. If, by an elementary and provisional definition, by ideology, we understand the misrepresented reality, or posing the wrong questions for a real problem, then we should argue that neoliberalism serves both as an ideological mystification of our real and actual problems (i.e. exploitation, different forms of domination, etc.) and a sign that we are engaged on what Žižek would call a 'false struggle.'

In this regard, if by the name Syriza we understand the name of the radical European Left, the prospect looks highly pessimistic. Their rightist turn should be read as a defeat and surrender before the global capitalism. Piketty and Syriza should be read together, the former

banner of "democratisation." Dean: 2012: 57-8. For more on critique of democracy, see Hamza 2013: 73-103

⁷² Boltanski & Chiapello 2005: ix

⁷³ It is interesting to evoke Harvey, who says that it is "one thing to be transgressive about sexuality, religion, social mores, and artistic and architectural conventions, but quite another to be transgressive in relation to the institutions and practices of capitalist domination that actually penetrate deeply into cultural institutions." Harvey 2012: 110

being both the theoretical base and supplement for Syriza's "practical" political activity. Perhaps, Althusser was all too right when he wrote that Marxism is perpetually in a state of a crisis. Following him, we should argue that our main task is to articulate a philosophical framework which would enable us to really fathom our predicament. And in doing so, first of all we should call things by their names: we should go back to the times when the Left conceived capitalism as its enemy (and not the periods or phases within capitalism as such).

Žižek once wrote that when there is no hope, there are principles to follow. This applies more than ever to our situation. We should locate the contradictions of our situation in the totality of capitalism as such. That is to say, we should see the principal problem in capitalism itself and not in its 'symptoms', as it were. This is the precondition of any attempt to overcome capitalism, if that is still what the Left stands for.

So, where does philosophy stand in all the crises of our situation? It might be strange for some of us to think of a Marxist philosopher, who never gave up on philosophy, but defended it against what we should call the "practical turn" of the 60's, which is becoming the predominant mode of the Left today as well. In the contemporary reign of 'interdisciplinarity' in the human sciences, along with Althusser we should argue that "in the majority of cases, the slogan of interdisciplinarity is a slogan that today expresses an *ideological* proposition" and that philosophy is "neither an disciplinary theory nor the theory of disciplinarity"⁷⁴ Against the *ideological propositions* of interdisciplinary practices and 'concrete actions', we need to reaffirm the primacy of thinking over the practices. He argued that the crisis of Marxism is not a characteristic only of Marxist theory or of organisations and political practices inspired by the former, but it is the crisis of Marxist theory and Marxist politics. However, from the philosophical point of view, the political crisis of Marxism points to its theoretical crisis. Here we see the intellectual character of politics (as thinking), and of philosophy as the site of registering its effects. Commenting on Marx's Eleventh Thesis, Althusser asked: "does this sentence promise a new *philosophy*? I do not think so. Philosophy will not be suppressed: philosophy will remain philosophy."⁷⁵

Hegel wrote that abstract theoretical work brings more to the world

⁷⁴ Althusser 1990: 79.

⁷⁵ Althusser 2001: 42

than any practical one, because when we succeed in revolutionising the world of ideas, actuality cannot remain the same.

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How to Act as if One Were Not Free. A Contemporary Defense of Fatalism

Frank Ruda

ABSTRACT:

The article draws on the thought of Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Marx to offer a critical account of a predominant subjective state today: indifference. It systematically elaborates its conceptual coordinates and shows in which sense it ultimately implies a problematic, misperceived conception of freedom. Against the background of this analysis, the article defends fatalism as a possible means to counter states of indifference and thereby attempts to move from critical analysis to the affirmative formulation of a principle of orientation: act as if you are not free.

Keywords:

Badiou, Descartes, Fatalism, Freedom, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Provisional Moral

“Man is the being from whose appearance results the existence of a world.” (J.P. Sartre)

“Kill your middle class indecisions, now is not the time for liberal thought.” (Bloc Party)

Critique and Provisional Moral

Many contemporary thinkers have insisted that in the contemporary world there is indifference, irresolution, undecidedness everywhere. Alain Badiou has even argued several times that today's political system rely not only on the production, but also on the administration and organisation of these indifferences. Therefore, it seems to be high times for offering an account of indifference, and providing the means of how to counter it. The following reflections should, therefore, not simply be read as a conceptual exercise drawing on the history of philosophy. Rather, they also claim a contemporary validity. The analysis of indifference provided subsequently should be read as an attempt to offer a conceptual assessment of a mode of subjectivity and subjectivisation that can be said to be dominant today. In this sense, the analysis is critical. Yet, the subsequent investigations do not limit themselves to a purely negative and critical account of the present status of indifference, they also propose a means to counter it, namely fatalism. But, one needs to be precise here: Fatalism is not, in itself,

already a new kind of subjective attitude; it is not already the emergence of a new kind of subject. Rather, I take fatalism to be one of the most crucial and most important strategic means – in the sense of a Cartesian provisory moral¹ – of a subjective preparation of real change to occur. The following remarks, therefore, do not propose an ethics, but first a critical analysis of a phenomenon governing the contemporary non-world, and ultimately propose one guideline for the struggle; a guideline that seeks to overcome the frustration, nostalgia, and melancholia omnipresent today in the regime of circulating bodies and exchangeable languages.

Indifference and Fatalism

There is a remarkable passage in the last, and maybe, at least today, the most obscure book of the first modern philosopher of the subject, namely in René Descartes’ “Passions of the Soul”. In this passage, Descartes remarks that in a situation, in which one does not know how to act or how to judge, because things are just not clear enough and one has not yet gained sufficient knowledge to evaluate them, a certain dosage of indifference or irresolution might help. It might help to distance oneself from the situation and reflect – it “thus... gives time to make a choice before committing oneself. In this respect, indeed, it has a beneficial function.”² But, and this is what makes this consideration remarkable, Descartes continues this thought by claiming that to remain within such a status of indifference, in a status that refrains from action “when it lasts longer than it ought, making us spend in deliberation the time required for action... is extremely bad.”³ So, the initially instructive and helpful mode of indifference, or irresolution, can quite easily become a problem for the subject when it does not get out of it anymore. And irresolution in judgment and action, indecision (Descartes uses the two terms nearly synonymously) is a result of a becoming-indifferent of the very agent that was supposed to act. With regard to this diagnosis, Descartes in his “Passions of the Soul” also offers an account of how to counter, overcome and fight irresolution – and irresolution, as should

1 Descartes introduces this concept in his *Discourse on Method* by stating: “lest I should remain indecisive [*irrésolu*]... I formed myself a provisional moral...” Descartes 1985b, 122.

2 Descartes 1985a, 390.

3 Ibid.

be added, is “a kind of anxiety.”⁴ The very means of countering this kind of anxiety – and, one should recall, that anxiety always has this effect of subjective destitution – and for overcoming the initially helpful indifference goes under the name of fatalism.⁵

What I will investigate subsequently is twofold: Firstly, in a sort of tour de force through some positions from the history of philosophy, I will attempt to give an account of what one might call the problem of indifference that I take to be, following Descartes, closely linked, maybe even to be synonymous with the problem of irresolution. I assume that this characterisation can also be instructive for a critical comprehension of our contemporary situation. In this first part, I will thus draw upon certain sources to outline the contours of a criticism of the state indifference. In the second part, I will formulate a defense of the Cartesian solution, a defense of fatalism as a means to counter the stagnating status of indifference. This will entail an outline of one crucial pre-condition of the concept of freedom.

Indifference and Animal Behavior: Kant

In Kant’s 1793 work, *Religion within the Limits of Reason alone*, Kant notes: “It is, however, of great consequence to ethics in general, however, to preclude, so far as it is possible, anything morally intermediate, either in actions (adiaphora [morally indifferent]) or in human characters; for with such ambiguity all maxims run the risk of losing their determination and stability.”⁶ Maxims become indeterminate, imprecise and unstable if there is something like intermediacy, indifference, adiaphora.⁷ And Kant, in the same book, depicts what he means by this sort of imprecision and instability. “A morally indifferent action (adiaphora morale) would be one that merely follows upon the laws of nature, and hence stands in no relation at all to the moral law as law of freedom – for such action is not a

4 Ibid. The French term Descartes uses here is not “angoisse” but “crainte”.

5 To be more precise Descartes does propose “courage and boldness” as direct means of countering irresolution, insofar they are “a passion and not a habit...” Descartes 1985a, 391. Yet, when he early in his book speaks about a specific obstacle arising from “things that do not depend on us” (Ibid., 379) Descartes first argues that “they prevent our forming a liking for other things whose acquisition depends on us” (Ibid. 380) and can be combatted by the assumption of “divine Providence... a fate [*une fatalité* in the original] or immutable necessity...” (Ibid.) I will elaborate in which sense I assume that the situation Descartes depicts with respect to indifference can also be overcome by this kind of fatalism – which also constitutively needs courage.

6 Kant 1996, 71-2.

7 For a long systematic treatment of the problem of indifference from one of the first popularisers of Kant’s thought, who taught Kant to inter alia, Novalis and Schiller, cf. Schmid 1809.

factum [“deed” in the sense of “something done”]....”⁸ What Kant states here is something that is far reaching, and of huge importance. To put this in simple terms, he diagnoses that, as soon as human beings act in a manner that is indifferent, that is to say as soon as human beings simply do not care,⁹ they do not act as if they were free. Acting in a manner that Kant calls indifferent, defines actions that can be described by recourse to mere natural laws.¹⁰ This means that as soon as someone acts indifferently, i.e. in such a way that his actions relate to something, one may say to their aim or end in an indifferent way – simply not caring what the outcome of an action is, for example – this makes it possible to conceive of these actions as being derivable, and deducible from mere laws of nature. And the laws of nature, as is clear for Kant, are the very converse of the concept and law of freedom.

Rendered in yet another way one can state: As soon as actions are, or become indifferent, with regard to what they aim at, these actions cannot be considered to be actions (in Kant’s words: deeds) in a proper sense any longer. Since, for Kant, the very concept of actions implies a conceptual reference to freedom. Indifferent actions are actions that lack – to remain within Kant’s terminology – the spontaneity of freedom. This is why they can be reduced to and derived from a natural, lawful kind of causality. Indifferent actions, thereby, function like the effect within or of a chain of causalities, and are therefore, actions that have the same status as mere causal mechanisms: Actions that are not actions any more. So, Kant states there is a danger of indifferent actions taking place within the domain of freedom, and the domain of freedom is, again this is evident for Kant, precisely the domain of human beings. This implies a far-reaching claim, namely that human beings can act as if they are not free, they can act as if they do not act. They can act as if they were akin to automats, to machines, determined by natural causality – and this also means, as one can argue with Kant, that human beings can behave like animals do, for the behavior of animals can be described in comparable terms. Machines and animals cannot be said to act freely and out of freedom, because their actions are determined heteronomously – their actions are determined by something else, not

.....
8 Ibid., 72.

9 Here, of course, the question arises is: what does it means not to care?

10 Indifference, here, translates the Greek (and Stoics’) term: *adiaphora*, which designated intermediary things, that are neither good nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly, etc. For an account of Stoic indifference cf. Geier 1997.

by their freedom, not by their free will. Say animals act out of instinct, which is part of their nature, that is to say: bodily constitution and when investigating how and why animals act – and this is what a certain type of the biological discipline does – it is not their free will, which stands in the main focus of scientific investigation.¹¹ It is rather their bodily needs, needs of reproduction, food, etc. that determines them. Animals cannot themselves determine (or reflect on) their (bodily) nature, it is rather that their nature determines them, and their actions.

What one can derive from Kant’s diagnosis is the following: As soon as human beings act in a manner that can be defined as indifferent, they act structurally in an similar way than animals do. They act in a way that relies on a heteronomous determination, and they do not determine how they act. Something is determining them, and this “something” can – at least for, and according to Kant – be described in terms of the laws of nature. This is the thesis that my subsequent elaboration will seek to unfold. How can it be that human beings, human animals, can act in a manner that is not properly human (whatever this is to say and however one can account for it) and in what sense can indifference be taken as a categorical presentation, which is able to explain this type of actions. What should be stated here is, that Kant uses this very term indifference in a rather modern sense, since in medieval philosophy (in William of Ockham for example) it still understood as name for a non-causal (i.e. contingent) and two-way (i.e. undetermined) power of the will¹² – as power for example to choose x or non-x ‘indifferently’ and that is to say: without any causal necessitation. Kant’s use of the term indicates that becoming indifferent in one’s actions and judgment is the very opposite of the medieval definition of the term. Indifference now precisely leads to, and even implies, causal or heteronomous determination of an action. The question is therefore: What does it mean to act indifferently? More precisely: Indifferent with regard to what? Here it is helpful to turn to Descartes.

Indifference and Error: Descartes

A quite famous passage from the fourth of Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* proves to be instructive here. Before this passage, in

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11 For an instructive, brief overview of the philosophical account of animal behavior, cf. Simondon 2012.

12 This is quite explicit in Ockham. Cf. Ockham 1967, 501. Therein, he argues that indifference and contingency are the two preconditions of free and voluntary action.

the course of his argument, to briefly recall it, Descartes begun his investigation by stating that anyone – and this is to say: any thinking, and this again is to say: any human being – can be deceived. Anyone can commit errors first of all in judgments but also in actions, anyone can fail and err. So, human beings can make fallacious judgments, make a blunder, and they can be deceived. This is the first characteristic that Descartes comes up with, at least in his *Meditations*. And they can first and foremost be deceived with regard to what they consider to be certain and true. So, they take something to be true, and to be certain, which is neither one nor the other. After stating this, he specifies the different media in which human beings can hold something to be true which actually is not true. The media of deception are multifold, since human beings encounter deceptions in rhetorical speeches, but also in language as such, in theological justifications of one's beliefs, in philosophical arguments, in scientific explanations, in our opinions or in those of our parents, teachers or friends that we have adopted a long time ago, in our habits, in our senses and ultimately even in any concrete thought (as we might be dreaming while assuming that we are awake). This enumeration of all the media of deception, famously led Descartes in the first three meditations to doubt everything that might be considered to be a source of error in judgment; any source of deception had to be suspended. And the outcome was the famous cogito-proof. But, in the fourth meditation he continues to ask why it is that we can err, that we can blunder at all. He claims:

“So what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin.”¹³ My will is so free, so unrestricted and unlimited that I can will something that I do not understand or might even misunderstand. The will thereby becomes indifferent. The bottom line of this is clear: I can be mistaken and deceived because I am free. Mistakes, therefore, seem to be the very proof of my freedom; since it is precisely through the freedom of my will that I am the most like God. Its infinity is the thing that makes me truly resemble him. As Descartes puts it: “God's will... does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the

.....
13 Descartes 1984, 40-1.

essential and strict sense.”¹⁴ My will is infinite in its freedom, and this very infinity is the source of my mistakes. How can this be? It is because it makes it possible for me to will even two radically incompatible, incommensurable, things at the same time. This means, systematically, that my will is so free that I can will X and non-X *at the same time*. This seems to be the very medieval definition of indifference – a will that has the capacity for both: affirmation and negation of an option. But, Descartes is more radical than this. Let me quote another passage in which this becomes apparent: “In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction — either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts — the freer is my choice. Neither divine grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary, they increase and strengthen it. But the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom...”¹⁵

Indifference is a feeling that it does not matter which choice I take. Therefore, indifference is for Descartes the poorest and lowest grade of freedom. This is because I neither have any inclination to one of the two options of my choice, neither due to knowledge nor due to a contingent commitment. Knowledge increases my freedom as it pushes me into one of the two possible directions. Belief or commitment does so also, for Descartes. But indifference is that which results – as an affect – when I neither tend in one of two directions at hand, but when both options have the same validity to me. This implies that I have the feeling of indifference when freedom became the mere existence of a choice. Not a choice that is to be taken, not a choice that is becoming or has to become actual or realised by actually choosing one of the two sides. Freedom of choice, the possibility of choosing without actually choosing (as it does not matter to me which side to choose) is what produces indifference. A will that wills X and Non-X *at the same time* is an indifferent will. This is why irresolution for Descartes is structurally analogous to indifference. And one should not forget: it is therefore indifference that is the source of my erring and my making mistakes. Why is that? Because, when I become indifferent, I have *already* made a

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14 Ibid., 40.

15 Ibid., 40.

mistake. I assumed that freedom was already realised in the possibility of having a choice and not the actuality of choosing. Indifference is the result of a misperception with regard to the very notion, to the very concept freedom. I make fallacious judgments, because, I already made a fallacious judgment understanding freedom in this way. Such a mistaken concept of freedom lays the groundwork for all the future mistakes that I will make. It is something like the fallacious condition of possibility, the *fallacious transcendental of all my future errors*.

Kant demonstrated that, as soon as I become indifferent in my actions, they can be described in terms of natural and deterministic causal relations. What one can derive from Descartes is what it means to be indifferent, not towards some concrete object of the world, but more fundamentally within one's actions in general: to be indifferent towards one own constitution, essence or nature. Human beings are the most God-like, because of the freedom of their will, but as soon as they misperceive what freedom is, they misperceive what their nature is. They misperceive it, by interpreting it as realised in the mere possibility of a choice, and, hence, they become indifferent. But they become indifferent not only, to be precise here, towards the two sides of the choice, but essentially toward themselves. Indifference is the lowest, the poorest degree of freedom, and this is because it is freedom in an unrealised form. Freedom as possibility of a choice is freedom as mere possibility of freedom, and therefore not as freedom. Freedom of choice implies for Descartes a conception of freedom that emphasises solely the possibility of freedom, not its actuality or reality. One may here recall that, in his discussion of Greek Stoicism, Alexandre Kojève once referred to Stoicism as the first ideology.¹⁶ Why? Because it implies a peculiar gesture of sovereign self-reliance that functions a justification of the slave's own practical inaction, and at its ground lays the following ideological claim: I am free as long as I know myself to be so. A claim, as Hegel also argued, that serves as the perfect justification of slavery. Such a stance is not only attacked by Kojève, and Hegel before him, but also by Descartes. And, from what has already been said, it should be clear why that is. It is because it results in indifference and irresolution, and not in proper action. And it is precisely this state of indifference or irresolution that is defined by the first ideological, maybe spontaneous ideological, mentality of the slave, that thinks it is enough to stick to the mere possibility of having a choice without actually choosing and acting

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¹⁶ Kojève 1980, 53. See also the commentary of this claim in: Comay 2011, 92f.

on its ground.

To resume, the result of the present investigation thus far is: indifference in actions leads, as Kant claimed, to heteronomous determinations of my will that turn me into a machine following natural causations, or, in short: turn me into an animal. Descartes supplemented this claim by offering an account of why I act as if I were an animal. It is because I have a misconception of what freedom is; yet, it is precisely freedom that marks my essence. Therefore, I act as if I were an animal, when I act in a way that relies on a misunderstanding of myself, of my own freedom. *I act in an animal-like manner if I act as if I were free, and am relying on a mistaken notion of freedom*. This is what the category of indifference indicates. But, why, as Kant claimed, does a misconception of freedom lead me into heteronomous determinations that, again, lead me to act as if I were free although I am not, when I am acting like an animal?

Indifference and Indeterminacy: Hegel

It is here, as always, that Hegel can help. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*,¹⁷ as well as in his *Philosophy of Right*,¹⁸ he offers a complex analysis of a will withdrawing from any concrete determination – not feeling itself inclined into any direction whatsoever. Hegel argues that, as soon as a free will refuses to determine itself, and assumes that the mere possibility of determination already is the realisation of its freedom, this will is driven into hugely problematic contradictions. By insisting that freedom of choice – without taking any concrete option– is the paradigm of freedom, the free will hypostatizes indeterminacy against any concrete determination. Thereby, it seeks to have the cake, and eat it, too. This is because it sees freedom only as freedom from determination, and, thereby, identifies it with indeterminacy – as the possibility of determination without actual determination. It takes this identification to delineate a universal notion of freedom. Yet, against its own will, the free will hypostatizing indeterminacy does not attain a universal claim, but merely a particular one. Against its own will – against the free will of the free will – this identification of indeterminacy and freedom simply turns out to be nothing but a particular determination of freedom. Thereby, although the free will

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¹⁷ See Hegel 1977, 355-409.

¹⁸ Cf. Hegel 2008, 28-52. For an account of the notion of the will in Hegel see: Ruda 2011, 136-148.

seeks to flee any determination, it is, against its own will, determined by its claim to indeterminacy. Being indifferent toward determination by identifying indeterminacy and freedom, as one can derive from Hegel, does not lead to universality, but into the midst of mere particularity, since indeterminacy is precisely not a universal concept, but is attained as the abstract negation of every concrete determination, and thus is nothing but one of two sides of the same coin. On one side there is determination pure and simple, and on the other there is (abstract and thereby particularised) indeterminacy. Yet, if the definition of a concept is derived from nothing else but only an abstract negation of its abstract opposite, it is not a universal but a merely particular concept. In a cunning-of-reason-manner – against the will of the free will willing indeterminacy as freedom – this consequence cannot be avoided.

Thereby, the insistence on freedom as indeterminacy flips over, literally against its will, and determines the free will. The free will seeking to flee determination, thereby, becomes in his very flight, determined by the act of fleeing. This determination (of insisting on indeterminacy) is therefore not a result of an act of free self-determination: the free will wanted to avoid determination and nonetheless ended up within it. This is why this involuntary determination of the will turns out to be a heteronomous determination of the will. For, it is not self-posed. It relies on a misunderstanding of freedom, for freedom is precisely not identifiable with indeterminacy. One cannot simply get rid of determination. So, what happens when I refrain from any concrete determination, become indifferent towards them and simply insist on the possibility of determination, of choice, my misunderstanding of what freedom is turns against myself and thereby I myself do violence against myself.¹⁹ This is because I reduce my own appeal to universality, and to freedom, to a merely particularly determined claim; to a one-sided notion of freedom as indeterminacy. This is the result of an attitude of indifference against any concrete determination. Hegel states, in his *Philosophy of Right*, that such a disposition of mind ultimately can be defined as follows: “A will which resolves on nothing is no actual will; a characterless human being never reaches a decision. The reason

19 This is why Hegel argues that, after the first instance of identifying freedom and indeterminacy, namely the French Revolution, after it first spirited away all determinations in the world, then the world itself had to turn at one point against its own protagonists that embodied the determination of indeterminacy. The identification of freedom and indeterminacy, which I also see at work in identifying freedom and the freedom of choice, ends up in self-induced violence. It would be interesting, although I cannot do this here, to relate this systematically to the argument about the tyranny of choice as developed in: Salecl 2011.

for indecision may also lie in a tenderness of feeling which knows that, in willing something determinate, it is engaging with finitude... However ‘beautiful’ such a disposition may be, it is nevertheless dead... possibility is not yet actuality.”²⁰ One can claim that for the free will abstracting from all concrete determinations, and assuming that it is the most free in and through this very act, another of Hegel’s claims is also quite fitting, namely that when it is the “most dead, its favorite words are ‘life’ and ‘enliven’” *When it is the most unfree, its favorite word is freedom.*²¹ The free will becoming unfree, through willing indeterminacy, is a dead entity, because, through its act of willing, it becomes heteronomously determined, and this determination has a mortifying effect on the very universal core of the human animal.

Without knowing it, and even while believing the absolute converse, I act as if I were free although I am not.²² By believing I am acting freely, but at the same time being unable to act freely under the conditions I set for myself, I end up acting precisely like animals do. Why is that? Because, for Hegel, the animal is that which can most basically be defined by stating that it does not know its limits as its limits. As Hegel claims: “If what has a defect [*Mangel*]²³ does not at the same time stand above its defect, the defect is not for it a defect. An animal is deficient from our point of view, not from its own.”²⁴ The animal which is deficient, and lacking something from our point of view, does not have the consciousness of its own lack. This is why Hegel can claim in a wonderful passage his *Lectures on the Fine Arts* that: “man is an animal, but even in his animal functions he does not remain within the in-itself as the animal does, but becomes conscious of the in-itself... and raises it... into self-conscious science... because he knows that he is an

20 Hegel 2008, 37. It would be important to demonstrate why Hegel assumes that in the next paragraph he can extend this analysis and develop a criticism of arbitrariness from it. I leave this demonstration for another occasion.

21 Could one not also assume that this very diagnosis is very adequate for the world we live in? Surrounded by enthusiasts, defenders, proponents, advocates and apologists of freedom, when political life is the most dead its favorite words remains to be freedom.

22 This is clearly one of the most apparent ideological slogans today because it disguises itself as a completely neutral and objective statement about the subjective conditions of actions: Act as if you are free! This imperative even prepares the logical ground for all the injunctions to enjoy, consume and be flexible, creative, and so on.

23 Although this would have sounded odd in English, one could have also translated „Mangel“ with „lack“.

24 Hegel 2008, 33.

animal, he ceases to be an animal....”²⁵ Yet, insisting on an indeterminate concept of freedom, i.e. freedom of choice, I do not experience my (own self-positing) limits as limits. This is because I act as if I was free, yet I am not; and, therefore, I bring myself into a position of acting as if I were an animal. This directly results from my misunderstanding of my own essence, i.e. of freedom.

The misunderstanding of my own nature generates the effect that I do not will my own freedom as realised, but that I will my freedom as possible, as possibility. Thereby, I fall into a position of willing against my explicit will my very unfreedom. This is what being indifferent – indifferent to determinations – ultimately comes down to. This result can also be articulated in the following manner: indifference toward determinations does not only lead to a misunderstanding of freedom, in the sense that I am determined against my own will, but it also leads to the effect that actions (in the proper sense of the term) become indistinguishable from non-or pseudo-actions. For, I assume, I am acting without taking sides, but I am taking sides *against* taking sides. I think I am irresolute, yet I am not. The very act that makes me indifferent, is also forcing me to be determined *without* and *against* my will. I act as if I was acting, yet because true action implies freedom, I only have the illusion that I am acting freely.²⁶ Indifference, therefore, also means that there is a wrong comprehension of what an action is – this is as one might say one of the mistakes, one of the first fallacious inferences that arise from the fallacious transcendental I established.

The diagnosis one can develop with regard to (the result of) indifference, aligning Descartes, Kant and Hegel is thus: human beings can act in a purely animal-like, and that is to say unfree, manner when: 1. they are heteronomically determined. This happens when 2. there is a misunderstanding of their own nature, i.e. of freedom. 3. What originates in this misunderstanding, consequentially, turns against the human being by hypostatizing, and producing an animal-like way of behaviour. It, thus, turns against the human by imposing a heterogeneous determination.

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²⁵ Hegel 1988, 80.

²⁶ Here one may of course recall the famous analysis Slavoj Žižek elaborated of how in contemporary societies the act of consumption comes with an ideological surplus, which makes me believe I am also acting politically, say when I buy a coffee at Starbucks and pay more for it to support suffering children somewhere in Africa. I actually do what I always do – consuming – yet without feeling any guilt or without having any bad conscious, because I assume that my act of consumption also implies a moment of social-political engagement.

Producing Indifference: Marx

Against systematical background, one can comprehend one claim that one can find in Marx's early writing. The early Marx formulated, over and over again, the idea that the worker who hopes to partake in the accumulation-process of capital, or who actually participates in it, is reduced to the pure functioning of his organic, i.e. bodily constitution.²⁷ His speaks of him as being part of a cattle, reduced to the mere function of his stomach,²⁸ etc. Yet Marx, even in his early years, was smart enough to not simply blame the worker for this effect. He saw clearly this as an effect brought about by the very functioning of capitalist dynamic, and its political economy. His basic claim was: capitalism reduces the worker to its animal like behaviour (and the whole question is if reduction is the correct term here²⁹) because it relies on a fake, problematic concept of freedom, and thereby seeks to impose a misunderstanding of it on everyone. This is why capitalism produces indifference. This is not only to say, as Georg Simmel put it, with regard to money, that capital “not merely reveals the indifference of purely economic significance but rather is, as it were, indifference itself”³⁰; moreover it produces an indifference – a perpetuated misunderstanding of freedom – that afterwards can be, and is, administered and organised. In *Capital*, Marx has shown that money is an abstract and indifferent medium, not only because it makes it possible to exchange whatever with whatever, and also not only because it makes the processes of production that stands behind each and every product, (as condensation of labor time and force) disappear; rather money is an indifferent medium, because, to own money does not generate concrete, but merely abstract options for actions.³¹

Capital makes it possible that one is able to do (buy, sell, accumulate, consume, etc.) things. But when one asks the question, what is the best thing to do with money, the answer is clear. The best thing to do with money is to save it, and accumulate more, or invest it,

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²⁷ The early Marx speaks of the worker for example as political economy's “beast of burden, as an animal reduced to the minimum bodily needs [*auf die striktesten Leibdesbedürfnisse reduziertes Vieh*].” Cf. Marx 1992, 290.

²⁸ Ibid., 285.

²⁹ For an extensive analysis of this diagnosis in Marx and the whole question of how production and reduction are linked through procedures of abstraction, see: Ruda 2014.

³⁰ Simmel 2005, 53.

³¹ For this also see: Lohmann 1992, 81-129.

and ‘make it work for you’. But what this ultimately means is that one owns money, but one does not, or is not supposed to spend it, although one obviously could. But, since it is much wiser to invest it to acquire more money, one abjures from direct action (i.e. spending money). So, not only the worker is reduced to a status that is designated by the category of indifference, Marx, is very explicit about the fact that for him the very exchange procedure and the very logic of capital produces only abstract options for actions. This is to say: actions that you could realise but that suit you better if they are not realized. This very dynamic also generates what Marx, in *Capital*, calls the “woeful countenance” of the “‘abstaining’ capitalist.”³² This means that even when you are a capitalist, and own quite a bit of money, you are in a status of indifference, because you could spend all of it, but the very logic of capital makes it much wiser to remain within the possibility of spending it than to actually spend it³³ (of course one might ask if this is still adequate for describing the logic of contemporary markets). But, Marx diagnosed within capitalism a constant reduction of human beings to a heteronomous determination which makes them function like things, i.e. automats, machines, or like mere bodies, animals describable in mere mechanical terms.³⁴ The true problem is that they still perceive their abstract non-actions as way of actualising their freedom. This overall dynamic, “the essence of capitalist production, or if you like, of wage-labour” was once framed by Marx, as logic, in which the human being experiences a constant “enrichment as its own impoverishment.”³⁵ One may say: its own unfreedom as freedom. What this formula articulates is one very precise way of rendering the socio-political aspect of what I referred to with the category of “indifference”. This is to say that, enrichment as its own impoverishment also implies a misunderstanding of one’s own freedom and it leads into a disqualification of voluntary self-determination, which brings about a heteronomous determination and reduces man to this very determination.

Yet, it should be kept in mind that obviously capitalism is not

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32 Marx 1982, 746. This obviously mirrors what already early Marx remarked when he claimed: “the less you give expression to your life, the more you *have*....” Marx 1992, 361.

33 One may of course ask if this is still an adequate description of the contemporary market dynamic. Yet, I assume it is, if one adds that there is also a peculiar logic of spending money that one does not have to save the status quo, in which, again, one does not spend what one has.

34 It reduces the worker’s “activity to the most abstract mechanical movement.” Marx 1992, 360.

35 Marx 2000, 1287.

nature, not natural and, hence, the animality to which it reduces the human being is not a first nature. Within culture, any form of nature is already mediated, i.e. second nature and in this sense the animality to which human beings are reduced is already processed, already adapted and produced second animality. In other words: it is produced indifference. Capitalism extrapolates and hypostatizes an animal aspect of the human animals that it itself produces. And this is also why this very animality is open for modification, for (ex-)change, for commodification – as already bodies, things and also animals can quite easily function as objects do, they can be bought and sold. The consequence of this is that people do not know that they are indifferent, and this is precisely one of the reasons that make them indifferent. They perceive their own unfreedom as their freedom – due to the misconception of freedom, on which they rely. Maybe, it is even more precise to say that they know it, but they do not believe what they know. They do not know, or do not believe that they know, that they are not in an adequate relation to their own essence, and nature but they act as if they were. In Hegel’s terms one can reformulate this, by saying that there is a contradiction with regard to the relation between concept and reality, yet having a misconstrue concept makes this contradiction disappear. This is why from this, again, further fallacies follow.

One might here supplement this diagnosis by recalling Heidegger’s claim about the distinctive character of the humans and animals, namely that human beings are those beings that have (and relate to, project into) a world, whereas animals live in an environment (where there is no such thing as projection possible).³⁶ What therefore happens if there is indifference, is that people lose their world (and also any kind of projection) – and, according to a well-known diagnostic claim of Alain Badiou, today’s world is not a world anymore and the name for this non-world, the absence of a world is for him: market.³⁷ What is a world that is no world anymore? It is an environment, an environment of and for predators and other animals “individually weak and constantly hunted down.”³⁸ This is due to the fact that the very concept of a world

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36 Cf. Heidegger 2001, 186-273.

37 In the most recent version of this diagnosis it reads as follows: „Today, there is no real world constituted by the men and women who live on this planet.... Because the world that does not exist, the world of globalization, is only a world of commodities and financial exchange. It is exactly what Marx predicted a hundred and fifty years ago: the world of the world market.” Badiou 2014.

38 Marx 1982, 797.

implies that it can be created and changed. A world is a product – at least of projections and collective endeavors – whereas an environment is how it is; no transformation of it can be envisaged from within it. Environments are how they are, and will at least up to a very fundamental degree, remain as they were, unless something from the outset changes them – like the comet that is supposed to have killed the dinosaurs. Environments are natural and if the world, by not being a world, becomes an environment is also becomes a de-historicised entity – and entity without (and possibility) of history. Worlds are products of actions, interactions, projections, struggles and of events. Struggles within an environment do not change anything, they simply display that there is the principle of the survival of the fittest at work, i.e. that there is some kind of natural(ised) competition. Within worlds, struggles may turn out to be what induces a world to change, events what even transforms what one assumes to be capable of, within the natural environment of the market – which is, as should be clear, a produced environment – there is no struggle and no transformation imaginable as even freedom is naturalised and turned into a given capacity of the body (say to desire or freely express itself). So, what is to be done with this? How to return to the impossible possibility of a struggle, even if it is one against one's own misconception of freedom? How to fight one's own spontaneous ideology of everyday life to naturalise one's own freedom?

Body and Soul: Descartes I

Against the delineated background, one can again draw nearer to Descartes' last published work, which maybe remains his strangest one, largely considered to be radically outdated in the majority of today's scholarship: his *Passions of the Soul*. Therein, as referred to in the beginning, Descartes proposes a solution to a state of indifference that might not only seem genuinely surprising, it is moreover, as I will argue, completely worth of being resurrected and defended: Fatalism. But, why can fatalism help against the state of indifference? Before one can answer this question, one needs to recap certain elements of the *Passions of the Soul*. The title already indicates that there is something bodily to the soul; there are passions it experiences.³⁹ Against a simple dualism between the body and the soul – although this reading is still dominant today –, Descartes insists that the free will, which defines my essence, cannot be what it is; namely, a will without any bodily, and

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³⁹ An instructive comment on this general topic in Descartes can be found in: Nancy 2004.

this is to say, any objective manifestations. The will is no will if it has no effects that appear within the world. This is to say that there can be pure logical arguments (pure thoughts), then there are pure perceptions (pure bodily effects), and then there are some things that are *at the same time* related to thought or to perceptions, i.e. to the soul and to the body. There are things for which the body is not the cause, but that are also not merely intellectual, rather they move the body.⁴⁰

The will is defined, in this book, as something that is not a bodily capacity, but as an instance that has effects on the body. One, thereby, can retroactively deduce its existence from the effects it has. Yet, the body can also have effects on that by which it is moved, it can have effects on that which has effects on it. It may present bodily restrictions to the effects that the will can have, by delineating a specific realm of the bodily possible, of what the body can do. There is thus a peculiar relation between something that is all about finitude (body) and something that is all about infinity (will). But this relation is two-sided.⁴¹ Not only because it has two poles, but, moreover, because the effects that one pole has on the other are radically different – a relation that looks different from each of the two sides involved. The will, the expression of the soul, can make possible what is not as such possible for and thus cannot be considered to be a capacity of the body. The body, on the other hand, limits the effects of the will, and is able to introduce (thoughts of) limitations into the soul such that it that block the infinity of the will. The link between soul and body is, thus, not a simple relation, as it takes quite different shapes depending from where one perceives it.

This relation, which cannot really be called a relation proper, introduces what Descartes calls “conflicts” into the soul⁴² – the soul struggles with the effects the body has on it, its passions, and how to sustain an adequate understanding of its own freedom and independence. And Descartes infers from this: “This make the soul feel itself impelled, almost at one and the same time, to desire and not to desire one and the same thing; and this is why it has been thought

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⁴⁰ To be more precise: Descartes distinguishes between activities of the soul that determine either the soul itself or the body, and between perceptions that either are caused by the soul or by the body. Therefore, there can also be bodily perceptions that move the soul – something that allows accounting for what I refer to as indifference. Cf. Descartes 1985a, 335-6. I leave the complete elaboration of this distinction for another time and place

⁴¹ A more precise rendering is: there *is* no relation between the body and the soul.

⁴² Descartes 1985, 345-6.

that the soul has within it two conflicting powers.”⁴³ This, is what may happen when the soul takes over the perspective of the body – a state of indifference may arise, in which the soul desires at the same time as well its freedom as its unfreedom – and the reason for this is a conflation of determination, that originates in the soul and those which emerge from the body. To deal with these sorts of conflicts, Descartes argues one needs a different definition of free self-determination. It can neither be purely intellectual and conceptual, nor purely bodily. For this purpose, one need to be “equip it [the soul] to fight with its proper weapons... firm and determinate judgments....”⁴⁴ The firmer the will’s judgments (manifesting the freedom of the soul), the firmer the realisation of its freedom. Its fortitude can only be measured by its effects, by its actions.⁴⁵ Actions that I take to be free, self-determined actions, but that are heteronomously determined actions, demonstrate the lack of this sort of steadfastness. Yet, how can one gain the certainty that one is firm and determinate in one’s will and actions? On one side this clearly has to do with knowledge⁴⁶ – knowledge of the situation one is in and knowledge of what is good and evil. However, on the other the firm character of the will’s judgments cannot completely be derived from knowledge. The reason for this lies precisely in the Cartesian notion of freedom, since it presents a limit-point of knowledge. It is, thus, crucial to briefly elaborate this concept of freedom.

Freedom Unthinkable: Descartes II
Descartes gives a clear, yet difficult account of freedom in his *Discourse on Method*. He begins with a simple consideration: I am able to doubt because I know I can err. From this, I can infer that I am able to doubt, because I made the experience of failure. I am able to doubt, because I know that I am not perfect. This is what makes it possible to negatively gain the concept of perfection, because I have the concept of lack

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43 Ibid., 346.

44Ibid., 347.

45 If the soul loses the conflict with the bodily solicitations, this loss appears in the guise of the passion of fear (recall that indifference is, as quoted in the beginning a kind of fear), which “represents death as an extreme evil which can only avoided by flight...” Ibid. This is crucial: if the body starts to determine the soul and its means of determining itself, namely the will, the effect is a fundamental fear of death which weighs sit down into the realm of finitude. The disastrous consequences of any hypostatization of finitude have been analysed by Badiou in: Badiou 2013-2014.

46 Descartes sums this up under the slogan: “The strength of the soul is inadequate without knowledge of truth.” Descartes 1985a, 347.

(erring, failure) and its proper understanding implies it’s opposite. The experience of “something” negative implies, in a negative manner, its own negation. Perfection is the negatively implied negation of the lack (I experienced), which is contained within the concept of lack itself. Because lack is the experience of an absence, one can apply the concept of absence onto itself. This is, as with Hegel, what it means to understand one’s limits as one’s limits. Lack becomes reflexive, and leads to its logical converse. One, thereby, gains the idea that there has to be something which is lacking the lack and this is precisely what perfection means: the lack of lack.⁴⁷ After the experience of failure, I can find negatively implied within me the idea of perfection – a Cartesian version of Plato’s anamnesis doctrine. And, as Descartes argues that my own imperfection results from my constitution, I am a composition of two different substances, i.e. body and soul. Therefore, that which is perfect, necessarily, has to suspend the source of my imperfection.⁴⁸ This is why he can deduce that something perfect – whose classical name is, of course, “God” – has to exist, better: has to have being. For, that which is perfect would not be perfect if it were not. Perfection is that which has to be, as lack of lack, and since lack includes the idea of limitation, what is perfect has to be unlimited, infinite. As soon as I make an error, I am forced to think something that logically precedes my constitution, I cannot but think – if I think – the lack of lack.

Descartes’ argument is far more radical than is usually conceived. He claims this is why “many are convinced that there is some difficulty in knowing God, and in even knowing what their soul is. The reason for this is that they never raise their mind above things which can be perceived by the senses: they are so used to thinking of things only be imagining them (a way of thinking specially suited for to material things) that whatever is unimaginable seems to them unintelligible.”⁴⁹ He strictly opposes such a limitation of thought. If God cannot have a body, then one has to think of him differently. Anything that has a body appears in a world, in a discourse. From this one can infer that God has to be non-discursive, un-worldly. God has to be even more subtracted from any bodily materialisation than the cogito. He has to be that which can only be grasped from within a discourse, a world, but as that which is

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47 Jacques Alain-Miller once referred to the lack of lack as “a place – where there is nothing.” Miller 2002, 139.

48 Descartes 1985b, 128-9.

49 Ibid., 129.

at the same time logically 'prior' to it (since he created it): *He is the post-discursively graspable pre-discursive*, the lack of lack.

He is what we cannot comprehend discursively (by imagining him). But we can think that there is something that we cannot comprehend. Put differently: *we can think that there is something that we cannot think*. We can think that which will always have been logically 'prior' to any discourse and it is unthinkable since thought is essentially discursive. If any existence – even the cogito – belongs to a discursive setting, Descartes demonstrates that we can think what *is* but does not exist. We can think being – “God” – but we think it as that which is unthinkable, because it does not exist. Hence, we have a clear and distinct idea of the unthinkable that is also completely rational. We can think the unthinkable, as that which we cannot think, yet we are forced to think it.

But, what does one think if one thinks what one cannot think? Descartes' answer is: freedom. One, thus, thinks the essence of human being. Therefore, Descartes is a dualist, but a peculiar one. He is a dualist because he thinks that there is thought, discourse, etc. on one side and that there is the unthinkable on the other. What does this mean? In the *Meditations*, Descartes has shown that I can err because I am in one respect absolutely God-like, namely what concerns my freedom. I am so infinitely free that my will can will A, and Non-A, at the same time. This is why I can err, but it also entails a claim about the essence of God and, as I resemble him in this respect, also about the essence of human beings. Jean Paul Sartre has demonstrated that God's freedom, in Descartes, is that of an absolute contingency of a creative will (this is why God is the name of the infinite), in short: God does not need to create, he wills it, and that he wills it, is contingent.⁵⁰ If human essence is God-like, humans are as free as he is, and if God is the name for the unthinkable, then this means that my essence is not a natural one. For, God is not natural; he is the creator of nature. This is why my essence must be – although I appear when I exist as a natural entity – non-natural, even a-natural. *My freedom is a-natural and at the same time I am a natural being*. Yet, and this is Descartes' claim, one should never naturalise one's essence. Since, as soon as one conceives freedom just to be a capacity that one naturally has (embodied in one's body), one already misconceives of freedom ends up in a state of indifference. Against this Descartes' claim is this: *there*

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50 Sartre 1967. In this regard Descartes anticipates the claim of Meillassoux that contingency precedes any kind of existence.

is no relation between the human and the animal, between body and soul – they are two different substances – but there is something like a human animal, an embodiment of the non-relation. There is no relation between the soul and the body but there is something like an embodiment of this very non-relation which is the human animal.

Acting-As-If-One-Were-Not-Free: Fatalism

On this ground, Descartes develops his wonderfully counter-intuitive argument for fatalism. Since freedom is not a capacity that I have naturally, it results from contingency (namely from something unthinkable). Freedom is not a capacity, but a result. There needs to be something making freedom possible. I am only free when I am contingently forced to be. This is why, as soon as one has started to conceive of the cogito, one is forced to think that which one can only think as that which one cannot think (i.e. God). That thinking is forced to think what it cannot think, means that the very notion of thinking implies that its proper concept originates from a determination that does not originate in thought itself, but from something or somewhere else. This also holds for freedom. I am forced to think, and I am forced to be free. I am unfree as soon as I conceive of my freedom as something that is in my power. This turns freedom into a capacity. But rendering freedom in terms of a capacity that I have (this is what grounds indifference) – as paradoxical as this may sound – implies that one hands oneself over to arbitrariness as weak form of contingency. What is, thereby, implied in the idea of freedom as capacity is not only a wrong concept of freedom, but, also, a wrong concept of contingency.

This is because as soon as I start to emphasise the “may-be,” the possibility of the two sides of a choice over the actual choice of one of the two sides, I do not only side with indeterminacy, but also with the idea that things could go either way. I hence conceive of contingency in terms of arbitrariness. One can thus derive that indifference also names a status in which either way is fine with me.⁵¹ Indifference emphasises arbitrariness, of two possible ways that might even conceptually prove to be contradictory; and, as soon as I do so, I emphasise something which can be, but also cannot be. I, thereby, side with a weak form of contingency. Not with a contingency that would enable me to make a choice – contingency as origin of freedom – but with a contingency

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51 In political terms, this implies obviously not only the abolishment of politics but also the very procedure in which any parliamentary election is fundamentally grounded.

of the choice and its outcome. I, thereby, side with, what Descartes calls, “Fortune”.⁵² As soon as I think that I have the power to choose whatever will be the course of the world or history, and I remain within this possibility, I have the impression that I could determine the world any time I want. Yet, actually, I rely on the arbitrary and fortunate contexts that always already determine me in a heteronomous manner. When I believe that the reality, and actuality, of my freedom lies in its very possibility, I hypostatize this very possibility, and end up being determined by arbitrariness.

To avoid this hypostatization of weak contingency, only one thing may help: the defense of absolute necessity, of utter determinism.⁵³ The idea Descartes puts forward is the following: one has to assume that everything is already predetermined, although one can never, and will never, know how. This disposition of mind is the only one that avoids me falling into the idealist position of assuming I could determine anything, and that everything is in my power, i.e. that freedom is my capacity. Such a stance, first of all, suspends the identification of freedom and capacity. And it enables to assume the full determinate impact of contingency (of God), that ultimately turns into necessity. This is, precisely, what he calls fatalism. To assume this position, as he claims one needs to courage (or even boldness).⁵⁴ Why? Since, in the first instance, the fatalist stance seems to imply the very abolishment of freedom. And indeed, it is the abolishment of freedom: of freedom as a capacity. What Descartes proposes is, to act as if one were not free. This is what sets up the very condition of actual freedom. For, thereby, any objectifying gesture is avoided, which could turn freedom into a capacity, creates indifference, and leads to heteronomous determination, and ultimately even to a wrong understanding of heteronomy. By fully assuming that one has objectively nothing in one’s power,⁵⁵ and will never know anything about God’s, i.e. contingency’s plan. But, it is precisely this,

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52 Fortune is therefore for Descartes a „chimera which arises solely from an error of our intellect.” Descartes 1985a, 380.

53 It should be clear that here Descartes is in strict party line with Hegel and Freud – as Hegel always defended absolute necessity (and totality) and Freud absolute psychic determinism.

54 Courage „disposes the soul to apply itself energetically to accomplish the tasks it wants to perform, whatever their nature might be.” Descartes 1985a, 391. Boldness is defined as “kind of courage which disposes the soul to carry out the most dangerous tasks.” Ibid. And getting rid of freedom as my capacity is quite a dangerous maneuver.

55 Descartes here makes a case comparable to Badiou: We have no power against truth. Cf. Badiou 2005.

which makes it possible to conceive of my actions in a purely subjective way. By acting as if I was not free – that is: being a fatalist – I affirm a determination that I cannot deduce from my capacities; namely, that it I am only free when something happens to me which forces me to make a choice. I thereby do not simply become the instrument of the Other, of God’s will (Descartes is not following any Eichmann-logic); I rather become even more responsible for my deeds, because everything is determined but it is fully unclear how. This is why, in some sense, I should not care about how it is determined. Since even the Other – here God – is also determined by contingency, which is to say that God has no plan about his plan either (he is also determined by contingency). For Descartes, I have to assume that I am determined (I am forced to be free or to think by something that does not spring from my thought or freedom), and this implies in the heart of the human, at the origin of true human actions, thus, lies something determining him in a manner that cannot leave us indifferent. Through fatalism one affirms that impossible possibility that true human actions are possible, although there is no objective guarantee (neither in me nor in the world) for them. This also affirms that the human animal is, in its heart, an inhuman entity. If one assumes this can avoid the type of indifference I outlined above. Fatalism, the defense of absolute necessity, can be considered to be a tool for a renewal of a true inhuman humanism, of real actions and actions of the real, in short: of freedom. Simply put for Descartes, and to me this seems valid especially today: only a fatalist can be free. This is because there is nothing to hope for, there is nothing to rely on, and in some sense there is nothing in our power. But, this avoids falling for the trap to act as if one were free. Therefore, even more so today I claim, one should risk being a fatalist. One should risk following the new battle cry: act as if you were not free.

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The Barriers to a Critical Comedy

Todd McGowan

ABSTRACT:

The political valence of comedy is difficult to determine. It appears often to mock figures of authority, but ideology also relies on comedy to create an investment in the ruling social structure. This essay argues that comedy has no inherent political leaning. We must determine the politics of comedy by analyzing how the conception of the social order that it produces. If comedy creates an image of the social order as a whole, it has a conservative function. But if comedy reveals the incompleteness of the social structure, it functions as a critical comedy that plays an emancipatory role in political struggle.

Keywords:

comedy, carnival, class struggle, exclusion, whole

Class Struggle at the Carnival

Comedy feels subversive. It disrupts the flow of everyday life and often calls social authority into question. If comedy didn't upset our usual way of thinking, it would fail to be funny. When I tell an unfunny joke, the lack of humor coincides perfectly with the degree to which it fits within accepted conceptions of the world. The comedian who asks, "Why can't you write with a broken pencil?" and responds, "Because you can't handle it properly," will have a short career as a comedian because this joke isn't a joke at all. It simply recounts the accepted answer that coincides with our conceptions about pencils and writing. In order to be funny, comedy must entail some challenge to accepted thoughts and associations of thought. The comedian who asks, "Why can't you write with a broken pencil?" and answers, "Because it is pointless," may not have a longer career than the first comedian, though this one at least stands a better chance. The pun on the word "point" will not lead to world revolution, but it does encourage the listener to reflect on why one writes rather than simply accepting the givens of the situation. This is why so many theorists of comedy attribute an inherent emancipatory quality to it.¹ Even in its most banal form, comedy is freedom.

Comedy liberates us from the constraints that govern our

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¹ Just to name a few: Mikhail Bakhtin, Alain Badiou, Simon Critchley, Robert Pfaller, and Alenka Zupančič.

everyday life, and even if we don't view it as radically egalitarian, we nonetheless associate it with a form of freedom. In comedy and jokes, we can say what would otherwise be impermissible in polite society. As long as we do so in the form of a joke, we can tell our bosses how we really feel about them and openly undermine their authority. Comic films can provide a thoroughgoing critique of American foreign policy even during wartime. Stanley Kubrick was able to make *Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) during the middle of the Cold War, despite its explicit critique of American leadership at the time. Stand-up comedy routines can offer a scathing political commentary that otherwise exists only in extremely marginalized venues. When we hear this mockery of political leaders or satire of cultural icons, the association of comedy with subversion and critique appears almost self-evident. The tone of comedy, in contrast to tragic seriousness, doesn't permit the solemnity of entrenched power figures to remain undisturbed. Those in power fear irruptions of comedy as challenges to their authority. Comedy seems to be class warfare by indirect means.

The image of comedy as class warfare finds its most vehement spokesperson in the figure of Mikhail Bakhtin, who sees this conception of comedy articulated in the work of Rabelais. In his works, Rabelais focuses on the carnival, a time of comedy in which festival and laughter displace everyday life. The comedy of the carnival derives from the inversion of social relations that occurs during this time. Those in power become the equals of the lowest members of society as a temporary suspension of social hierarchy ensues. Usual life transpires through firm distinctions between different classes and rules that sustain these distinctions. But comedy reveals these distinctions to be illusory and permeable.

Bakhtin understands that carnival is only a temporary suspension of societal hierarchy and that this hierarchy returns after the carnival, but nonetheless the comedy that takes place during the carnival has an inherent radicality to it. Bakhtin goes so far as to claim that the forces of oppression can never mobilize comedy and laughter on their side. Laughing creates a sense of equality between those who are laughing and those who are being laughed at. Bakhtin writes, "laughter could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hands."² According to this conception

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² Bakhtin 1984, p. 94.

of the comic and its effect, authority requires seriousness and is actually identified with seriousness. When authorities engage in comedy, they are implicitly undermining their own authority and taking the side of the people, even if they aren't aware of this. Authority operates through fear, but comedy liberates us from fear. When we see the comic underside of authority figures and experience them being mocked, we cease to fear them. Whatever the terror that authorities would inflict on us, if we respond with laughter, we undermine its power to oppress.

The problem with Bakhtin and his conception of laughter is that he never had the chance to see *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976).³ In this film of the revenge of a high school outcast on her fellow classmates, we see clearly how laughter and comedy aren't straightforwardly associated with emancipation. Carrie (Sissy Spacek) is the subject of mockery throughout the film, and this mockery comes to a head at the high school prom, where popular students find great amusement in dumping pig's blood on her from a pail hanging in the rafters. Their laughter in this scene is an index of Carrie's humiliation and oppression. There is nothing liberating about it, and it does not disturb their authority at the school. Even the unpopular students join in the mockery of Carrie. Laughter, after all, can serve as "an instrument to oppress and blind the people." Carrie soon avenges herself on them, but the comedy that they find in the act of dumping blood on her stands apart from this vengeance (which is itself not at all comic).

The treatment that Carrie receives in De Palma's film is familiar to anyone who has witnessed racist, sexist, homophobic, or anti-Semitic jokes. These jokes emanate from a position of social authority and work to enhance the authority embodied by those at the top of the social hierarchy. They offer the enjoyment that comes from the act of excluding rather than the mockery of authority. When we see figures of authority derisively mocking and laughing at the downtrodden or the excluded can have no doubt that the valence of laughter and comedy is not as clear-cut as Bakhtin imagines it to be.

Even when authorities mock themselves or allow themselves to be mocked, it is not always evident that this mockery subverts their authority. Pretensions of comic subversion often fail to subvert at all. Comedy can assist the authorities in cementing their authority just as

³ Bakhtin just missed it. He died in 1975, and De Palma released *Carrie* in 1976.

easily as it can undermine that authority. There is, in short, no inherent political valence to the comic act. Sometimes comedy can function in a critical way, but it can just as easily function conservatively. The question is how we can determine what makes particular forms of comedy critical and what makes other forms conservative.

Our tendency is to look for the political valence of comedy in either who creates the comedy or who is its object. If the source of the comedy is a figure of authority, we assume that the comedy functions conservatively because authorities don't intentionally undermine themselves and remain authorities. Jokes constructed by social outcasts, on the other hand, seems ipso facto critical. On the side of the comic object, the political situation is reversed. If the object of the comedy is someone already excluded from the social order, we believe that the comedy is conservative insofar as it preserves the exclusions that constitute the social order as it is constituted. No one believes, for instance, that the racist joke or the comic sketch about the homeless challenges existing social relations. And when a joke targets a political or economic leader, it seems inherently critical.

Oftentimes, the type of subject and the type of object coincide: either the figure of authority finds comedy in mockery of the excluded, or one of the excluded tells a joke undermining symbolic authority. One can easily imagine a business leader recounting a racist or a sexist joke or laughing at satirical depictions of the excluded, just as one can also imagine a group of servants laughing at the foibles of the upper class families that they serve. In both cases, the political bearing of the subject and object of comedy line up exactly.

But this method for evaluating the politics of comedy doesn't hold up under close scrutiny. Complications quickly ensue. The marginalized can tell jokes at their own expense, as we see with many Jewish jokes. The joke that recounts a waiter at a diner coming to a table of Jewish woman and asking, "Is anything OK?," has a Jewish source and a Jewish target. Equally, authority figures can tell jokes that genuinely challenge their own authority. This occurred when President Obama, asked why he had stopped smoking, joked that he was afraid of his wife. In these cases, the source and the target are the same, which makes it difficult to judge these jokes politically in terms of the source and the target.

There is, however, are even more significant problem with type of evaluation. The trouble is that the group of servants laughing at the foibles of the families that they serve doesn't necessarily undermine

their libidinal investment in the authority of these families. It can easily augment the investment. In a similar way, the temporary toppling of social hierarchy can ultimately reinforce this hierarchy.⁴ This is why we must look elsewhere for a way of judging the politics of comedy.

Since seemingly critical comedy can have a conservative effect, the evaluation of comedy must examine not just its source or object but take into account its effects. We can identify the difference between the comedy of critique and conservative comedy through the effect that the comedy produces on both its source and its object. The radical potential of comedy lies in the specific way that it disrupts our everyday lives and our everyday understanding. The everyday persists through the sense of wholeness that undergirds it. Events follow one after another without disjunction, and subjects relate to each other without antagonism. But comedy has the ability to reveal division or splitting where we perceive wholeness, and when it sustains this revelation, it functions successfully as a critical comedy or a comedy of critique. The comedy of critique exposes the incompleteness of the social order and of the subject who exists within this order. In the comedy of critique, both the source of the comedy and its target appear divided internally, and it is the emergence of this internal division that enables us to laugh while also facilitating critique.⁵

But the comedy of critique is not the dominant manifestation of comedy. When comedy subtends a sense of wholeness in either the subject or the social order, it functions conservatively and helps to entrench a belief in the intractability of social authority. The difficulty with analyzing comedy is that even comic moments that seem to disrupt social authority often play the role of stealthily supporting rather than undermining its power. It is not enough to look for authority being mocked. Conservative comedy is far more prevalent than the comedy of critique.

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4 To be fair to Bakhtin, he understands that the temporary suspension of social hierarchies can serve to reinforce these hierarchies, but he nonetheless clings to the idea that comedy and laughter themselves are inherently liberatory. This is the fundamental point of contention.

5 Robert Pfaller sees the act of emphasizing division as characteristic of all comedy, not just the comedy of critique. He writes, "Comedy is based on this simple, sobering position of materialism: It recognizes the fundamental *decentering* of individuals who perforce always see themselves as subjects, as centers." Pfaller 2005, p. 264.

The Comedy of Social Exclusion

Most comedy buttresses social authority through sustaining the exclusions that make it possible. It creates the image of a social whole that acquires its wholeness through the exclusion of an excess. Wholeness is not inimical to exclusion but depends on it because the exclusion provides the external point of reference that enables the structure to define itself as a whole. There is no wholeness without an exclusion, and the task of conservative comedy is one of constituting the wholeness by way of the exclusion.⁶ It draws attention to the excluded element and derives humor from its excesses. A large portion of American entertainment is rife with images of black comic excess created for the purpose of creating the image of American society from which this black is excluded.

In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, Donald Bogle identifies what he calls the coon as the primary figure of racist comedy in American society. Though there is just as much racism in uncle toms or black mammies (two other figures that he identifies), it is the coon who exists for the sake of laughter and who, for that reason, proliferates more than the other racist figures.⁷ According to Bogle's description, "Before its death, the coon developed into the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language."⁸ Bogle's description implies a sanguine view of this figure's demise, but an examination of the history of recent Hollywood films reveals that he spoke too soon, that the comedy of the coon lives on, even if its manifestation is not so blatant as the depiction of a lazy buffoon in the silent film *How Rastus*

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⁶ Jacques Lacan's concept of male sexuation has its basis in the logic of the whole and the exception. The universe of men subjected to castration emerges through the exclusion of one man who is not subjected to castration. The universe of women, in contrast, has no wholeness because no one is not subjected to castration. The lack of an exception makes it impossible to create a whole.

⁷ In his *Bamboozled* (2000), Spike Lee constructs a long montage sequence from Hollywood films and television shows the varying racist deployments of blackness. Though we also see a few instances of dramatic rather than comic racism, the primary focus of Lee's montage is the creation of the coon figure and its ubiquity. One can see traces of the coon in almost all of the other figures: even though the hypersexualized black buck is menacing, he is also somewhat ridiculous and thus somewhat a coon.

⁸ Bogle 2001, p. 8.

Gets His Turkey (Theodore Wharton, 1910). In early films such as this one, the coon is the sole focus, and this is what has changed in more contemporary appearances of this figure.

The coon is often now the sidekick to a white hero and provides comic relief from the central drama. This is the case in a series of action films from the 1980s onward. For instance, in *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), New York police officer John McClane (Bruce Willis) finds himself isolated in a Los Angeles skyscraper battling criminals who have taken hostages and are robbing the building. Overweight local officer Al Powell (Reginald Veljohnson) receives the call to investigate, and when we see him receives the dispatcher's call, he is in the process of buying multiple packages of Twinkies at a convenience store. Instead of eating watermelon like the traditional coon, he eats Twinkies, but the effect is the same. The film mocks Powell for his excessive weight and eating habits, and after he arrives at the skyscraper, his status as a coon figure becomes even more evident. McClane drops the body of one of the criminals from a high floor in order to alert the unknowing Powell to the criminal presence in the building. When the body strikes Powell's car, the criminals begin shooting at Powell as well, and he drives his car wildly in reverse while screaming until he ends up in a ditch. This image of Powell in the careening car confirms the coon status that the introduction to him buying Twinkies first suggests.

The *Lethal Weapon* series of films often places Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) in the coon role (though it also gives him a serious role in the drama as well). The comic focus on the coon reaches its apex in the opening scene from *Lethal Weapon 4* (Richard Donner, 1998), in which Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Murtaugh face a heavily armed shooter in the middle of a city street. Riggs convinces Murtaugh to strip down to his underwear and flap his arms like a chicken in order to distract the criminal while Riggs shoots him. Murtaugh doesn't steal chickens like classic coons but instead acts like a chicken. And after Murtaugh engages in the comic display, Riggs informs him that he had Murtaugh do this only for his own amusement (and that of the spectator) rather than for the stated intention of distracting the criminal. Riggs' admission is important for the spectator's comic pleasure because it reveals the inutility of Murtaugh's buffoonery. The coon performs simply to humor the spectator, not to accomplish any aims within the narrative.

The type of comedy doesn't die out by the 1990s but continues in the 2000s and 2010s with *Rush Hour 3* (Brett Ratner, 2007) and *Ride*

Along (Tim Story, 2014). In all of these films, the coon figure is a police officer, which is not coincidental though it seems contradictory. If the coon marks social exclusion, the cop is, in contrast, an insider. But the coon as police officer is humorous because it shows that even when this figure is fully ensconced in the social structure, he never really belongs, and his exclusion constitutes the social structure as a whole.

Laughing at the excluded outsider in order to produce a sense of wholeness is the primal form of comedy. It persists not due to a lack of knowledge or progress but because it enables spectators to believe in society as a substantial entity without any cracks. The excluded coon figure obscures the social order's traumatic incompleteness. When we laugh at the coon, we assure ourselves that it is possible to belong to the social order, even if we ourselves do not.⁹

Faking Critique

While it is easy to identify the conservative function of the coon figure and comedy that targets the excluded, it is more difficult to see this same process at work in comedy that targets the authorities. Nonetheless, the comedy of the carnival falls directly into this same category. Forcing the king to walk naked down the street while wearing a clown mask during the carnival seems to undermine the king's authority by showing a lack of authority within the appearance of authority. But this performance can easily buttress the king's authority. This type of comedy renders the king comic, but it does so by demonstrating to spectators that even this comic spectacle cannot disrupt the authority of the king. The king shows that he has the ability to appear as a lacking subject in order to prove that he isn't. In this sense, there is no political difference between laughing at the king in the carnival and laughing at the coon on the screen. Critical comedy might arise if the scene goes too far and begins to slip beyond what the king had authorized. But medieval carnival, for the most part, sustains the wholeness of the figure of authority, and this gives it a conservative function.

One modern equivalent of conservative comedy of the medieval carnival is the White House Correspondents' Dinner, a banquet where authority openly mocks itself. This annual event requires the

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9 It doesn't really matter is spectators laughing at the coon figure identify with the coon or not. The point is that his exclusion produces the image of the social order's wholeness. This wholeness is the great ideological deception, both for those who believe that they belong to it and for those who are excluded from it.

president to speak before the White House correspondents and other invited guests, and the speech always involves a series of jokes at the president's own expense. The comic object is authority itself and its failures. For instance, after the invasion of Iraq on the pretext that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, George W. Bush feigned a search for the never-discovered weapons in front of the audience, looking under the podium and all around him. This joke undercut the very basis for the Iraq War and used comedy to confirm critiques that he had launched the war under false pretenses. It was a genuinely funny joke, and we can't simply dismiss it as failing to achieve the status of comedy. And yet, this self-mockery did not undermine Bush's authority because it positioned him, as the teller of the joke, as a substantial authority. The White House Correspondents' Dinner is an authorized space, like the medieval carnival, and the jokes that emerge from it remain within that space unless they manage to disturb its fabric by violating the conventions that sustain the space. One laughs at the excessive war fought over what didn't exist, but while laughing, one remains within the symbolic structure that justified the war and made is possible. Laughing at Bush's self-mockery is just an extension of writing columns defending the decision to go to war in the first place.

But even when the comedy doesn't come from the president himself, it still can serve the very authority that it mocks. In addition to toppling the power of authority, comedy can provide a site for this necessary disobedience without threatening the structure of authority. It suffices to look at Robert Altman's classic film *MASH* (1970) to see how comic subversion actually enables a social structure to function more effectively than seriousness. The film contrasts comic figures Hawkeye Pierce (Donald Sutherland) and Trapper John McIntyre (Eliot Gould) with serious officers Major Frank Burns (Robert Duvall) and Major Margaret Houlihan (Sally Kellerman). Burns and Houlihan exhibit devotion to the army and its authority, while Pierce and McIntyre use comic acts and statements to undermine this authority. They disdain rank, steal military property, make gin in their tent, devise various pranks, and joke throughout their surgeries. This earns them the enmity of Burns and Houlihan, who attempt to have them punished for their antics. But in the end, Altman shows Burns, made irate after Pierce and McIntyre broadcast his nighttime tryst with Houlihan over the camp loudspeaker, taken away by the military police in a straitjacket. In the film, the comedy of Pierce and McIntyre triumphs over the seriousness of Burns and Houlihan.

Altman clearly intends his film as a critique of military authority and a celebration of the subversiveness that Pierce and McIntyre exhibit. Their comedy challenges military authority and discipline as it manifests itself in Burns, Houlihan, and other high ranking officers. In addition to their comic struggle with this authority, Altman shows the banality and ineptness of this authority. The commander of the hospital, Colonel Henry Blake (Roger Bowen), shows more interest in fishing than in the war, and General Hammond (George Wood) is concerned about playing and wagering on a football game, not about furthering the war effort.¹⁰ As Altman reveals throughout the film, military authority does not operate as a serious source of disciplinary power but consistently proves ineffectual and distracted.

The problem with this attack on military authority lies in the relationship between the comic subversion and the war itself. The humor that Pierce and McIntyre generate does not hasten the end of the war or spur broader challenges to the war's objectives. Pierce and McIntyre actually help their unit to work efficiently. The strict obedience of Burns actually disrupts the functioning of the military hospital far more than the antics of Pierce and McIntyre. The latter enable the other members of the hospital staff to work amid horrible conditions and inconceivable trauma while still maintaining a psychic equilibrium, which is why the authorities tolerate their behavior. Just as a sports coach tolerates and even tacitly encourages locker room pranks, the military leaders turn a blind but knowing eye to the comic subversion perpetuated by Pierce and McIntyre. The seriousness of Burns would thwart the hospital's functioning, while the comedy of Pierce and McIntyre make this functioning possible.

Pierce and McIntyre do not align themselves with military authority, and the film also eschews any such alignment for the spectator. But at the same time, we see that the effect of their comedy does not change attitudes toward the war or hinder the ability of anyone to serve in the military. They evince a dislike for the war and the carnage that it entails, but their comedy provides but an interlude that creates a coping mechanism for the carnage. In this sense, Pierce and McIntyre exhibit precisely the defects of Bakhtin's carnival as a political strategy.

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¹⁰ The football game that concludes *MASH* completely disrupts the narrative movement of the film. This indicates the discontinuity between narrative and war: though we believe that authorities begin wars in order to vanquish the opponent and reach the end, the film reveals that there is no real desire to end the war but rather an enjoyment of its prolongation.

Their humor, even when it targets military authority, does not disturb that authority. By publicly broadcasting the tryst of Houlihan and Burns that they listen to via a hidden microphone, they create a situation that results in Burns being sent away and Houlihan losing her hard edge, but in the end, they play along with authority and organize a football game with General Hammond's team. Though they recruit a former professional player who helps them to upset the General's team, this defeat doesn't create any realignment of the authority structure nor does it interrupt the war effort. The film counts among Altman's failures because its comedy never successfully hits the target at which it aims.¹¹ But this type of comic failure is not unusual. It is even more common than the blatant conservative comedy that employs the coon figure.

The Comedy of Critique

It is tempting to claim that conservative comedy is not really comedy, that the failure of comedy to challenge the ruling order indicates an absence of authentic comedy. This is the position of Alain Badiou, among others.¹² He insists that comedy "tells of the other side of signification, it inflicts wounds for which there is no cure." In light of this definition, Badiou concludes, "What is clear is that for the moment there exists no modern comedy," though he does not rule out the existence of the occasional "funny play."¹³ By differentiating comedy from the mere "funny play" and thereby preserving the inherent critical status of comedy, Badiou effectively lets comedy off the hook. The act of defining conservative comedy as an absence of comedy doesn't solve

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¹¹ Altman may be the most inconsistent filmmaker in the history of cinema. He made several unqualified masterpieces, like *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *The Player* (1992), and *Short Cuts* (1993). But he also made several complete failures, including *Popeye* (1980), *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), and *Dr. T. and the Women* (2000).

¹² Alenka Zupančič offers her own distinction between authentic and inauthentic comedy. She writes, "False, conservative comedies are those where the abstract-universal and the concrete do not change places and do not produce a short-circuit between them; instead, the concrete (where 'human weaknesses' are situated) remains external to the universal, and at the same time invites us to recognize and accept it as an indispensable companion of the universal, its necessary physical support. The paradigm of these comedies is simply the following: the aristocrat (or king, or judge, or priest, or any other character of symbolic stature) is *also* a man (who snores, farts, slips, and is subject to the same physical laws as other mortals). The emphasis is, of course, precisely on 'also': the concrete and the universal coexist, the concrete being the indispensable grounding of the universal." Zupančič 2008, p. 30.

¹³ Badiou 2008, p. 233.

the problem of comedy's political bearing. It merely transposes this question into a different domain and requires that we pose it in a new form. The question becomes, "What differentiates comedy from the funny work?" But this remains the same question.

Badiou's response is that genuine comedy exposes and undermines figures of authority. He cites as examples the Priest, François Mitterrand, and John Paul II. He understands that comedy must offend, but he always envisions it offending figures of power rather than the excluded. This becomes, for Badiou, the definition of comedy. The vehicle for this subversion is a character that Badiou calls "diagonal." The diagonal character reveals that the identity of figures of power is a purely discursive identity, a symbolic fiction in which we have invested ourselves and from which we might disinvest. The diagonal character is, for Badiou, the sine qua non of comedy and the key to its subversive power.¹⁴ But the diagonal character is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a critical comedy. As the example of *MASH* illustrates, conservative comedy can easily employ the subversion of those in power, and at the same time, the comedy of critique can target those who are excluded.

A comedy of genuine critique must reveal that the social authority itself is not simply a discursive entity but necessarily lacking. It must show the social order and the subject itself as incomplete. The problem with most comedy is that it hides a secret investment in the wholeness of the authority that it mocks or in the position excluded from this authority. The comedian wants to preserve the idea of a substantial existence, to preserve some ground for identity. The comedy of critique adopts a position of enunciation without any such ground.

It is possible for authority figures to do this and thus subvert their own authority, just as it is possible for those among the excluded to identify with the wholeness of authority and create comedy that reinforces it, but it is much more difficult. The difficulty lies in the authority figure's refusal to abandon the symbolic identity that authority confers. Authority grants the figure of authority status within the symbolic structure and confers wholeness on this authority. As an authority, one matters, and everyone within the symbolic structure offers recognition to the figure of authority. By abandoning the authoritative

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14 In the preface to his own series of plays *La Tétralogie d'Ahmed*, Badiou notes the necessary status of the diagonal character and claims that his creation Ahmed is an exemplar of this position. He writes, "a 'diagonal' character ... has always been a major condition of comedy." Badiou 2010, p. 18.

position of enunciation, one also abandons this recognition and joins the mass of the excluded. In doing so, one incurs ostracism, vilification, and even condemnation. One is divided against oneself. This is why so few in authority are able to take this step in the direction of a genuinely critical comedy. Critical comedy, authored by an authority figure, costs this figure its authority.

The trajectory of comedy relative to the authorities that it mocks is directly parallel to the trajectory of Hegel's philosophy in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel's gambit in this work is that critical analysis will demonstrate that whatever appears a substance (or a self-sustaining independent whole) suffers from the same division that the speaking subject endures. This is why he claims in the preface to the *Phenomenology* that "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*."¹⁵ By grasping that substance is always subject, Hegel doesn't abolish authority as such, but he shows that there is no substantial authority, which means that the power of authority is always tenuous. Like Hegel, comedy enables us to confront the division within authority and gain purchase on it. This is the critical function of comedy in its relationship to authority.

Vice President Dick Cheney was a figure of great authority during the presidency of George Bush. Though Bush often played the clown, Cheney was always the serious leader, the one willing to endorse torture in pursuit of enemies and to evince authoritativeness. One of the great comic instances of the early 2000s centered around him precisely because of his serious demeanor and sense of imperturbable authority. On February 11, 2006, Cheney went quail hunting with an acquaintance, Harry Whittington, a 78 year old man. While aiming for a bird, Cheney accidentally (and non-lethally) shot Whittington in the face and neck region. The comedy of this event stems from the position in which it places Cheney. Rather than being a figure of rigorous authority, he instantly becomes a bumbling fool who shoots a fellow hunter instead of the proper target. Even the most solid authority figure can reveal himself as a divided subject who can't shoot straight. The incident received expansive coverage and comedians devoted much attention to it because it disrupted the authority of an authority figure.

But we can't simply confine the target of critical comedy to figures of authority. There is also a critical comedy that mocks the

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15 Hegel 1977, p. 10.

marginalized and oppressed. Though it seems hard to stomach, such comedy can be just as critical and perhaps even more so than the comedy that mocks authority. This is what Charlie Chaplin accomplishes in his films, and through mockery of the marginalized Little Tramp, he calls the system that marginalizes the Little Tramp into question. One doesn't laugh with the Little Tramp against the social order when he is unable to keep up with the speed of the assembly line in *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936); one laughs at him. But by showing the split within excluded figure, Chaplin eliminates any possible idealization of the excluded.

Why *Duck Soup* is Funnier Than *Monkey Business*

The importance of authority for comedy seems to reside in the opportunity that law provides for transgression. If we didn't have authority, we wouldn't have comic incidents that involve defying social authority, such as the moments in *Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) when the Delta Tau Chi fraternity defies the college authority represented by Dean Wormer (John Vernon). The wild activities of the fraternity have a comic effect because the authority exists for the fraternity to transgress. The toga parties, the drunkenness, the sexual openness, and open defiance of Dean Wormer constitute the comedy of the film. The fraternity is comic because it thwarts the efforts of the law to control it. This defiance is the source of the film's comedy, and Dean Wormer's authority is the background against which this defiance operates. As *Animal House* illustrates, social authority establishes the order that comedians can subsequently undermine. But the comic importance of authority actually extends further than its establishment of the rule that comedy disturbs.

Authority itself is more comical than its transgression because the authority's self-division is the condition of possibility for its transgression and thus logically privileged. Many slapstick comedies focus on those outside social authority who find themselves constantly besieged by the authority's excesses. This is the case with films like *Animal House*. Of course, one can achieve sublime comedy outside social authority, but even *Animal House* relies on the internal splitting of the authority itself. Without this splitting, the transgression of the law would not have any comic potential. The comic priority of social authority relative to its transgression becomes evident if we contrast two of the early Marx Brothers comedies made at Paramount, before the departure of Zeppo from the group and before the move of the other

three brothers to MGM.¹⁶

Monkey Business (Norman McLeod, 1931) is the third Marx Brothers film and the first to be made directly for the screen (that is, not transformed from a stage version).¹⁷ Most of the film takes place on a ship where the brothers are stowaways. In an opening sequence, they sing in the barrels where they are hiding in the cargo hold, and much of the film's running time involves them subverting hiding from the ship's authorities and subverting the ship's captain. Like the Delta Tau Chi fraternity in *Animal House*, the brothers occupy a position outside social authority during the entire film. They generate comedy in the film through their defiance of this authority, which begins with them hiding in barrels and continues with them running throughout the ship, creating havoc while avoiding the crewmembers chasing them.

One of the highlights of the film involves the brothers trying to pass through customs. Because they are stowaways on the ship, they lack the proper documentation for entering the United States. Each brother tries to use the passport of Maurice Chevalier, but the customs officer, as one might expect, refuses to accept this false identification. This refusal occasions a physical defiance of this authority figure, and he ends up with custom stamps on his bald head. At every point in the film, the brothers are on the outside of the law, and their victims are the legal authorities who try to reign them in. Their defiance shows that the authority doesn't have authority over them.

While there are funny moments in *Monkey Business*, the film as a whole fails to sustain its comedy in the way that the other films of the Marx Brothers do. There are only a limited number of ways to flout authority onboard a ship. Because all the comedy lies in authority's transgression, the film never exploits the potential comedy of the authority itself. The captain and the customs officer are simply foils for the jokes of the brothers, and they never themselves become humorous. The comedy of disobedience that *Monkey Business* employs leads to the repetition of the same types of gags, and this repetition renders the film

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16 Though there are some memorable scenes in *A Night at the Opera* (Sam Wood, 1935) and *A Day at the Races* (Sam Wood, 1937), it is clear to most viewers that the first five films made at Paramount constitute the Marx Brothers at the height of their comic genius.

17 Their first two films were originally stage plays that the brothers performed on Broadway. But even the later films written directly for the screen suffer from the same stage-like quality that hampers the first films. There is a no marked formal difference that emerges in *Monkey Business*.

the weakest of the Paramount films.

The position of the Marx Brothers in *Monkey Business* atypical. In each of their other Paramount films, at least one of the brothers himself occupies a position of authority. In *The Cocoanuts* (Robert Flory, 1929), Mr. Hammer (Groucho Marx) is a hotel owner, and Jamison (Zeppo Marx) works as his assistant, while in *Animal Crackers* (Victor Heerman, 1930), all four brothers occupy established social positions, with Groucho playing the famous explorer Captain Spaulding. *Horse Feathers* (Norman McLeod, 1932) follows this dynamic, as Groucho plays a newly appointed college president, Professor Quincy Adams Wagstaff.

In *Animal Crackers* and *Horse Feathers*, the figure of authority reveals its self-division. The former depicts Captain Spaulding (Groucho Marx) insulting the wealthy Mrs. Rittenhouse (Margaret Dumont) in almost every one of his interactions with her, despite the attention and hospitality that she lavishes on him. At one point, he tells her, “Why you’re one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen, and that’s not saying much for you.” Minutes later, he offers her an insurance policy that will provide for her, he says, “in her old age, which will be here in a couple of weeks now, if I’m any judge of horse flesh.” In these representative lines, Spaulding compliments Rittenhouse but immediately transforms the compliment into an insult. Despite her wealth and status, Rittenhouse endures these types of insults throughout the film, and they have the effect of revealing authority, in the figures of Spaulding and Rittenhouse, at odds with itself.

Horse Feathers begins with Quincy Adams Wagstaff being named the new president of Huxley University. At the ceremony, Wagstaff appears with his professorial gown open while smoking a cigar. His opening speech to the faculty and students shows disdain for the usual trappings of academic authority. Though he is the new university president, he openly admits to privileging football success over academic success, and he unleashes a kidnapping plot in order to ensure a victory over the rival university.¹⁸ Wagstaff shows that the university president doesn’t have the substantial authority that we would ordinarily attribute to this figure.

It is not coincidental that in the final and most successful Paramount film, *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933), Groucho not only plays

18 The football game in *MASH* directly alludes to the conclusion of *Horse Feathers*, which lampoons college authorities by illustrating how a football game is much more important than the college’s academic mission. In Altman’s film, the football game trumps the war effort.

a figure of authority but the ultimate authority—the ruler of Freedonia, Rufus T. Firefly.¹⁹ The contrast between *Monkey Business* and *Duck Soup* is extreme. The comedy in *Monkey Business* derives from excessively defying authority, while *Duck Soup* produces comedy through embodying authority. The status of *Duck Soup* as the masterpiece of the Marx Brothers is now secure, and it depends largely on the role that Firefly plays relative to his own authority.²⁰ As the newly appointed leader of Freedonia, he reveals this authority as excessive and at the same time as lacking. This coincidence is apparent from the moment of his first appearance. When the patriotic “Hail Freedonia” plays for him to be introduced as the new leader, he doesn’t initially show up at all. The song repeats in order to prompt him to appear, and again he is absent. Here, the film creates comedy through the excessiveness of the introduction—its booming sound and its repetition—and the absence of any figure to embody the authority.

After the repetition of the anthem, the film cuts to Firefly still in bed, and we see him quickly dress. When he does finally make an appearance in the great hall, he doesn’t enter in his assigned place. Instead, he slides down a fire pole and stands next to a soldier. As “Hail Freedonia” repeats once more, he is in line to greet the leader instead of being in the position of the entering leader. When Mrs. Teasdale (Margaret Dumont) finally locates him, rather than acting like an authority, he begins with the comedy routine, telling her to pick a card from the deck that he has. He then proceeds to assault Teasdale with a series of insults about her weight, her relationship to her deceased husband, and her position relative to himself. The comedy of Firefly in this scene depends on his status as the new ruler of Freedonia. His position as an authority reveals the self-division of that authority.

When Firefly doesn’t act like a figure of legal authority despite occupying this position, he acts both as a lacking subject and as an excessive one. His absence from his own introduction reveals that he doesn’t fully identify with his position as a social authority, but his behavior with Teasdale shows him acting excessively within this

19 All of the brothers except Harpo occupy positions of authority in *Duck Soup*. In addition to Groucho playing the ruler of Freedonia, Zeppo plays Firefly’s assistant Bob Roland and Chico plays the Secretary of War Chicolini.

20 This was not the case when *Duck Soup* originally appeared. It did not fare as well as their earlier films in terms of box office receipts or critical reception.

position. Authority is funnier than its transgressions because it necessarily brings these two positions together. The genius of *Duck Soup* is placing a figure who clearly doesn't fit within the law as the authority. The disjunction between Firefly's actions and his symbolic position is nothing but the disjunction of social authority itself. But making this disjunction comically evident is always difficult because comedy relies on the social bond for its effectiveness.

The Fundamental Barrier

No one laughs alone. Even if one watches a funny television show at home without anyone else present and manages to laugh, the laughter implies the presence of others who join in. When we laugh alone, we imagine others who would also see humor in the events that we witness, and without this social dimension, it would be impossible to enjoy comedy. The social dimension of comedy is evident in the contagiousness of laughter. When we see others laughing at some unknown incident or joke, we often spontaneously laugh ourselves, even though we have no idea about the source of the humor. This contagiousness and our inability to laugh alone reveal that comedy exceeds us as subjects or forces us to exceed ourselves. When we laugh, we laugh beyond ourselves and amid others. This is why those who praise laughter and comedy focus on their inclusionary quality. Laughing subjects want others to join in their laughter. In the experience of comedy, the cliché “the more, the merrier” holds true.

Comedy is inherently social and brings people together, while tragedy isolates the individual's opposition to the social order. Even those who reject social convention in a comedy, like the women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* who withhold sex from their husbands, do so for the sake of social betterment (putting an end to a costly war), and those who don't act for the sake of the society, like Socrates who spends his time ensconced in idle philosophizing in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, are revealed as fools by the comedy. Comedy lifts the subject out of its private life and engages it in the social world, even when the subject experiences this comedy alone.

In his discussion of comedy and laughter, Henri Bergson goes so far as to view laughter as the revenge of society on the individual who steps out of line and disobeys the unwritten rules of the game. Comedy, as Bergson sees it, is the antithesis of revolt. It recoups those who stray by offering them humiliation as the recompense for their attempts to separate from the society. He says, “it is the business of laughter to

repress any separatist tendency. Its function is to convert rigidity into plasticity, to readapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the corners wherever they are met with.”²¹ Bergson adopts a relatively sanguine attitude toward this social repression of separatism, but he does characterize laughter as a process in which “society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it.”²² The social dimension of comedy leads to inclusion, but this inclusion has, as Bergson's description suggests, a supereogic quality to it. A laughing group puts an intense pressure on others to join in with the laughter.²³ It is precisely this tendency that aligns comedy with the power of the social order as such and the image of its total authority. We laugh together because comedy punishes individual transgressions.

The inherently social nature of comedy blunts its critical edge. Though it can criticize the pretensions of individuals who locate themselves outside of the social order or in a transcendent position relative to this order, it most often does so in the name the substantiality of the social order. When laughing, one feels as if one belongs, and this sense of belonging to a whole is the antithesis of critique. This wholeness depends on exclusion, and this exclusion manifests itself just as much as the sociability of the comic.

If no one truly laughs alone, then it is also the case that there is no joke at which everyone can laugh. Comedy demands not only inclusion but also exclusion. Though comedy can include the object of the joke within the comic sphere, there must be someone excluded from that sphere, someone who doesn't get the joke or whom the joke necessarily marginalizes. If the joke did not exclude anyone, it would not be funny. This is the fate that all attempts to create an inoffensive humor necessarily suffer. Comedy that doesn't offend someone ceases to be comedy.

But the fundamental stumbling block to a comedy of critique

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21 Bergson 1956, p. 174,

22 Bergson 1956, p. 187.

23 The failure to join in leaves one at risk of exclusion, which is the reverse side of comedy's general inclusivity.

is not that it must exclude. It is instead the illusion of wholeness that derives from comedy's specific amalgam of inclusion and exclusion. The comedy of critique cannot allow any entity to escape unscathed. Neither the source of the comedy nor its target nor a third party can retain the illusion of wholeness. Comedy brings together the disparate, but if it is to be critical, it must do so in order to show that all wholeness finds itself constantly beset by the disparate. If we laugh together, we must at the same time recognize that we are already apart.

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Capitalism and Repetition: Marx and Lacan

Simon Hajdini

ABSTRACT

The research article offers a Lacanian reading of the thesis according to which Marx's general formula of capital introduces the principle of repetition. The article initially follows Deleuze, for whom repetition is the direct opposite of exchange, which is always an exchange of equivalents. Deleuze, however, immediately moves on to link repetition to theft and gift, which are altogether withdrawn from circulation and thus escape the laws of exchange and are attainable only through their transgression. The paper shows why Marx couldn't agree with such a conception of repetition and its object, and why such a conceptualization is not radical enough. Marx's wager is to think repetition and its surplus-object beyond mere transgression, and hence also beyond the economy of gift and theft.

Keywords:

capital, enjoyment, fetishism, ideology, perversion, repetition

The thesis according to which Marx's general formula of capital introduces the principle of repetition can only seem a (complacent?) commonplace. For it is immediately evident that the formula $M - C - M'$ implies repetition. First, the repetition of money as a qualitatively homogenous thing, that presents its starting-point and its concluding moment, and, hence, also the repetition of the act of exchange, which first takes the form of a purchase, a metamorphosis of money into a commodity; and, in a second step, the form of a sale, a metamorphosis of a commodity back into money. If we abstract from the forms of commodity and money, the act of exchange effectively amounts to a repetition of the act of purchase, which first takes place as a purchase of a commodity with money, and, then, as a purchase of money with a commodity.¹ But the initial thesis is evident from yet another perspective, namely from the point of view of the distinction between the simple circulation of commodities ($C - M - C$) and the circulation of capital ($M - C - M'$), as it was introduced by Marx. Commodity circulation – selling in order to buy, that is, the exchange of a privately produced commodity for money, and the exchange of money for another

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¹ "[I]f one neglects the formal distinction between buying and selling, [he] buys a commodity with money and then buys money with a commodity." (Marx 1976, p. 248)

privately produced commodity – forms a closed circle that starts with a need that, by way of a redoubled act of exchange, arrives at (the object of) its satisfaction. The satisfaction of need, that is, consumption, forms the purpose of this process, which is to be situated outside circulation; and its final result – a commodity intended for consumption – doesn't serve as a starting point of a new cycle of circulation. When this cycle begins anew, it begins from naught anew.

Contrary to the simple circulation of commodities, the circulation of capital ($M - C - M'$) forms an open circle, that doesn't start with a need and end with its satisfaction or consumption of a commodity, but, instead forms an essentially limitless process.² Since the purpose of capitalist production is exchange-value, and not use-value – since its purpose is not the satisfaction of needs or wants but the accumulation of capital, that is, its valorization – the circulation process has no external limit. Consequently, as soon as money is withdrawn from circulation it stops functioning as capital, and if capital is to retain its capital form each cycle of repetition of the act of exchange has to pass into yet another cycle. Contrary to the repetition of the act of exchange in a single cycle of circulation, whose purpose is marked by the sphere of consumption as something external to the sphere of circulation, we witness here the repetition of the cycle itself; the repetition of repetition, in other words, the repetition of the unified cycle of a redoubled repetition of the act of exchange: $M - C - M' - C - M''$... However, the initial thesis that the general formula of capital introduces the principle of repetition, does not amount to this. It remains irreducible, both to the repetition of the act of exchange and to the repetition of the circulation cycle, even though the two are not entirely unrelated to it.

Repetition and Transgression

Since the purpose of capitalist production is the valorization of value, the exchange of money for a commodity, followed by the exchange of a commodity for money, would be meaningless if this very movement didn't introduce a certain difference, namely the difference between the initial and the final sum of money; the difference in the magnitude

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² "The simple circulation of commodities – selling in order to buy – is a means of carrying out a purpose unconnected with circulation, namely, the appropriation of use-values, the satisfaction of wants. The circulation of money as capital is, on the contrary, an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits." (Ibid., p. 253)

of value indicated by the tiny index of the expansion of value (D'). If the simple circulation of commodities relies on equivalent exchange, which doesn't produce any surplus, the circulation of capital functions only on the condition that a surplus traverses the generality of equivalent exchange. And it is precisely this object that propels, and gives meaning to, the circulation process, while at the same time functioning as the lever of repetition. Hence, repetition lies beyond the generality of cycles and equivalences. Marx's name for this object as the lever of repetition is, of course, surplus value.

I will try to further develop this point by recourse to a rather unexpected reference. "Repetition is not generality," writes Deleuze in his famous incipit to *Difference and Repetition*:

Generality presents two major orders: the qualitative order of resemblances and the quantitative order of equivalences. Cycles and equalities are their respective symbols. [...] [W]e can see that repetition is a necessary and justified conduct only in relation to that which cannot be replaced. Repetition as a conduct and as a point of view concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities. [...] If exchange is the criterion of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition. There is, therefore, an economic difference between the two.³

Exchange is the criterion of generality. Generality consists of two major orders, those of qualitative resemblances and quantitative equivalences. The formula of simple commodity exchange ($C - M - C$) clearly relies on the order of quantitative equivalences. On each of its two extremes, we find commodities that don't resemble one another in the least, since both of them present two different use-values, and, thus, two different means of satisfying one's needs. Moreover, this qualitative difference is the very condition of exchange. I only exchange a use-value, or a useful thing, for a qualitatively different useful thing that can satisfy a need that the first one cannot. But, under the conditions of commodity production, in order to exchange one useful thing for another, I have to abstract from the qualitative difference between them and reduce this difference to the order of quantitative equivalences. Qualitatively different use-values have to be reducible to a homogenous exchange-value. Thus, the qualitative difference of the first commodity

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³ Deleuze 1994, p. 1.

vanishes in the qualitatively indifferent money-form so as to acquire, via its mediation, the form of a commodity with a different use-value. In Lacanian terms, this movement starts with a need that aims at some use-value as a particular qualitatively specific object of satisfaction. But, in order for the need to realise its object and arrive at its satisfaction, it has to be articulated as a payment-capable need (zahlungsfähiges Bedürfnis) – as a need kneaded by the signifier. It has to be articulated as a signifying demand, as money, the pure image of value beyond usability. Here, money functions as a “vanishing mediator,” a perpetually disappearing means of circulation mediating the satisfaction of needs.⁴

The formula $M - C - M'$ displays an inverse relationship of the orders of generality. The two extremes are qualitatively alike, they are both money, and, thus, qualitatively they are the same thing. As I already indicated, money differs from other commodities by embodying the erasure, or the extinction, of qualitative difference as such, the drowning of particular needs in the generality of pure demand.⁵ And, if in the first case, the entire process relied on the qualitative difference between the two extremes, here its driving force is, instead, the quantitative difference between qualitatively homogenous extremes, the difference between the advanced sum of money (M) and the valorized sum (M') withdrawn from circulation, and immediately entering a new valorization cycle. It is only as such that value differs from money, and takes on the form of capital as self-valorizing value. Capital as self-valorizing value is the subject of this process, the subject that, however, remains irreducible to money and commodity, appearing only through the process of the alternation of their forms. In itself, it is nothing but this movement of exchange, nothing but an übergreifendes Subjekt,⁶ a transitive subject or, better still, a cross-subject, alternately taking on

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4 The translation of the movement of exchange in simple commodity circulation into Lacanian terms immediately signals that what is at stake in it remains irreducible to simple satisfaction of needs, to a levelled out calculus of needs and their satisfaction. The intervention of the signifier introduces into this movement the instance of desire, thus essentially transforming it. Here, we encounter the problem that Wolfgang Fritz Haug developed in the 1970s in his famous Critique of Commodity Aesthetics (see Haug 2009 [1971]). Haug adds to Marx's couple of natural and value form of the commodity (its use and its exchange value) the category of aesthetic form, which is irreducibly attached to commodities as use-values. Commodities never satisfy bare needs: that which lures us into consumption is precisely the surplus of (signifying) demand over need, the surplus that opens up the space of desire. I will return to this point.

5 “[F]or money is precisely the converted form of commodities, in which their particular use-values have been extinguished.” (Marx 1976, p. 251)

6 Ibid., p. 255.

two different value-forms while remaining irreducible to them. Hence, money entering the circulation process is not always-already capital but will have been capital when it will have passed its movement. Moreover, the temporal mode of futur antérieur is a structural characteristic of capital. Capital, as a “cross-subject,” is situated at the crossing point between will and have been, in their very interval. As soon as it becomes something that has already passed, as soon as its interstitial, or interval nature reaches the point of completion, it ceases to function as capital and is reduced to the mere money-form. Money is capital only retroactively – as the subject that triggers the movement of the entire process, capital is the retroactive result of its own movement:

$$\frac{M \rightarrow M'}{\$ \leftarrow \dots}$$

As soon as the final magnitude of value (M') is withdrawn from circulation – as soon as it is fixed in the mere money-form, thus ceasing to function as transitive or processing value – it also ceases to function as capital. That is why a capitalist who withdraws his, or her, capital from circulation is immediately transformed into a Schatzbildner, a treasure-builder or a miser; (s)he is transformed into the pre-modern rich (wo)man, who hoards and saves money without possessing a single atom of capital. The treasure-builder saves money by saving it from circulation; the capitalist withdraws it from circulation by throwing it into it.⁷

For Deleuze, repetition is the direct opposite of exchange, which is always an exchange of equivalents. But, in the passage quoted above, he immediately moves on to link repetition to theft and gift, which are altogether withdrawn from circulation, and, thus, escape the laws of exchange and are attainable only through their transgression: “In every respect, repetition is a transgression,” reads one of the catchwords of

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7 “The ceaseless augmentation of value, which the miser seeks to attain by saving his money from circulation, is achieved by the more acute capitalist by means of throwing his money again and again into circulation.” The English verb “to save”, adds Marx, “means both retten [to rescue] and sparen [to save].” (Ibid., pp. 254–255 and n. 10) The antinomy between the treasure-builder and the capitalist has seen a new turn in the ongoing crisis, as favorable conditions for the accumulation of capital are created by enforcing the miserly policies of treasure building to states that find themselves in the midst of the so-called “debt crisis.” The crisis dethrones capitalists into mere misers or treasure-builders, while the miserliness of states is now supposed to save capitalists from their own miserly role.

Difference and Repetition.⁸ Repetition takes place in the mode of the transgression of the law, such as the law of commodity exchange as the exchange of equivalents; hence, for Deleuze, the singular universality of the object of repetition is attainable only by way of transgression. In contrast to Deleuze, what is at stake in Marx's conceptualisation of repetition, insofar as it is grounded in the increment of value, in a pure surplus, is precisely a mode of repetition that is not simply external to circulation, and which enforces itself not against the law of equivalent exchange, but, rather, through it. Marx's wager is to show how the sum of money advanced, and thrown into circulation, can undergo augmentation without undermining the laws of commodity exchange, or, to put it differently, how equivalent exchange can produce a surplus-without-equivalent as the lever of repetition:

The transformation of money into capital has to be developed on the basis of the immanent laws of the exchange of commodities, in such a way that the starting-point is the exchange of equivalents. The money-owner, who is as yet only a capitalist in larval form, must buy his commodities at their value, sell them at their value, and yet at the end of the process withdraw more value from circulation than he threw into it at the beginning. His emergence as a butterfly must, and yet must not, take place in the sphere of circulation. These are the conditions of the problem. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*⁹

For Marx, repetition is, and yet is not, the opposite of circulation; hence, its object is the paradoxical "part of no part" of circulation. This is why the spheres of circulation and repetition, the latter hinging on the surplus as its object and momentum, are not simply opposed to one another. The surplus is not the result of a transgression; it is not simply an element external to circulation, but rather its extimate element, the site of its inner otherness, which eludes the opposition between exchange and repetition, between generality and singularity, between equivalence and incommensurability, etc. But the point one can draw from Marx is not simply that, besides repetition as the opposite

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⁸ Repetition "is by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particulars subsumed under laws, a universal opposed to the generalities which give rise to laws." (Deleuze 1994, pp. 3 and 5) Here, Deleuze comes uncannily close to Bataille, who opposes the excessive un-economical waste to rational consumption (see Bataille 1986).

⁹ Marx 1976, pp. 268 269.

of exchange and, besides equivalent and exchangeable objects, one needs to conceive of yet another type of repetition, and yet another type of object without an equivalent. Marx's point would be stronger here. If one thinks the surplus under the criterion of theft and gift (as Deleuze does), one does not think surplus at all. If we try to grasp it by way of transgression, it necessarily eludes our grasp.

Repetition cannot be reduced to theft or gift, which eludes economy as such, even though it might function as its extra-economic support. Theft and gift lay outside equivalent exchange; they hinge on an object without an equivalent, a non-exchangeable and irreplaceable object that can only be reached by way of transgression, a violation, a crime against the quantitative order of equivalences determining the exchange of commodities. In contrast to this, Marx has to explain the possibility of a lawful crime, a crime that doesn't suspend the law. He has to account for the possibility of theft under the conditions of equivalent exchange; he has to explain how equivalence can produce a surplus of value, or how to think the production of surplus beyond the economy of theft and gift. The obverse side of this problem is the reduction of the surplus implied in theft and gift to a lack. Marx shows that the value stolen by theft or given as gift, even though exempted from the relations of exchange, forms no surplus and – contrary to Deleuze's point – remains radically grounded in relations of exchange, that is, in the coordinates of generality and in the order of quantitative equivalences. Theft is a mere redistribution of value, and even though it is not consistent with the laws of exchange it, nonetheless, only exists in the sphere of circulation, which is precisely the particular sphere from which Deleuze tries to exempt it. Theft is not a correlate of surplus irreducible to relations of exchange; it does not thwart these relations, but merely shifts them in such a way that a surplus on the one side is manifested as a loss on the other.¹⁰

Therefore, the difference between Deleuze and Marx amounts to the Lacanian distinction between two paradigms of jouissance as

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¹⁰ "Within the sphere of circulation, valorization would only be possible if commodity C is purchased below its value or sold above its value. In this case, the sum of value advanced can be increased, but one capitalist's gain is only possible if another capitalist takes a loss of the same amount. At the level of society as a whole, the sum of value has not changed; it has simply been redistributed, just as if a simple act of theft had occurred." (Heinrich 2012, p. 90)

the increment of knowledge.¹¹ Deleuze presupposes an antinomial relation between signifier and jouissance; he proceeds from their radical incommensurability. A signifier is a negative relational entity, the value of which relies, solely, on the difference in relation to all the other signifiers. The exchangeability of commodities relies on a signifying abstraction from their use-value; commodities are commodities because they enter mutual relations, the value-substance of a particular commodity existing only in its communication with other commodities. Putting it another way, value is a form and not a substance.¹² At the opposite end of this translatability and exchangeability of commodities as exchange-values, we encounter enjoyment as the lever of repetition beyond equivalent exchange, that is, repetition relying on an object without equivalent, repetition conceived by Deleuze in terms of theft and gift. In contrast to this, Marx conceives of enjoyment as the increment of the functioning of the capitalist discourse; he sees it as a discursive surplus that is related to the signifier, and which implies no transgression of those forms that determine the capitalist social bond. It is no coincidence that Lacan's most thorough analysis of the capitalist discourse¹³ is to be found in the seminar that marks the aforementioned reconceptualisation of jouissance, as it is also no coincidence that, in this reconceptualisation, Lacan abundantly refers to Marx, and explicitly links the concept of surplus enjoyment to Marx's notion of surplus value. One of the central theses of Lacan's Seminar XVII is that enjoyment does not result from transgression, and that capitalism as a specific discourse of the extraction of surplus value is precisely the ultimate example of this logic.¹⁴

Gift and Theft – Fantasy and Perversion

At this point one could venture the thesis that Deleuze's romanticism

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¹¹ For various paradigms of enjoyment in Lacan's teaching, see Miller 1999.

¹² "Putting it another way, language is a form and not a substance." (Saussure 2011, p. 122)

¹³ Students of Marx often pause with suspicion upon the characterisation of capitalism as a discourse. If we abstract from terminological misunderstandings, the critique usually boils down to the claim that to equate capitalism with discourse is to neglect its historical dimension. Yet this is precisely what Marx does. His aim in *Capital* is not to develop a theory of a historically specific type of capitalism but to explicate the laws of capitalism as such, the fundamental forms of capitalism as a social bond. These laws are of course historical, yet merely in the sense that they only remain operative within capitalism, be it led by Asian or any other values. (For a critique of a "historicizing" reading of *Capital* that can be traced back to Engels and Kautsky, see Heinrich 2012, pp. 30–32.)

¹⁴ See Lacan 2007.

of theft and gift is connected to a deeper mystification regarding the very concept of capital, and at once implying a paradigmatic misunderstanding of the form of the social bond. As we have seen, capital implies a certain notion of subjectivity. Since it remains irreducible to the elements of the circulation process (money and commodity), it forms a processing value, an instance of a "cross-subject" as the paradoxical retroactive result of its self-movement. Since the valorization of capital, capital's inherent surplus cannot be explained in terms of circulation and equivalent exchange, it unavoidably seems that the valorization of capital is its self-valorization; it seems that capital "has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself by virtue of being value."¹⁵ The concept of capital as a cross-subject hence generates an ideological mystification that has retroactive effects on the notion of capital as a subject. The occult quality concerns the presupposition that capital possesses an intrinsic power of value valorization, a productive force of its own; and this presupposition is precisely what forms the specific blockage of knowledge that Marx calls the capital fetish. Let me supplement my schema:

$$\uparrow \frac{M \rightarrow M'}{\$ \leftarrow \Delta M} \downarrow$$

The schema abstracts from the commodity¹⁶ and entails the advanced sum of money (M), which does not yet function as capital and which at the other extreme of the circulation process reappears enriched with a surplus (M'). ΔM designates the increment of value, that is, surplus value, the excess of value over the value advanced.¹⁷ Capital as a cross-subject (\$) is nothing but this movement of circulation, the retroactive result that, however, appears as the original agent of the process, namely as the subject of the production of surplus value or as the surplus' productive correlate. If we abstract from the subjective motivation of a particular capitalist – which, for Marx, is completely

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¹⁵ Marx 1976, p. 255; translation modified.

¹⁶ With this abstraction we effectively get the formula of "interest-bearing capital." This abstraction does not change our argument but merely makes it easier for us to outline the capital fetish in its purest form.

¹⁷ "The complete form of this process [of circulation of capital] is therefore $M \rightarrow C \rightarrow M'$, where $M' = M + \Delta M$, i.e. the original sum advanced plus an increment. This increment or excess over the original value I call 'surplus value'." (Ibid., p. 251)

secondary, and derived because the capitalists are merely “the personifications of economic categories,” characters who appear on the economic stage¹⁸ – the advanced sum of money (M) appears as always-already capital (M/\$), despite the fact that it becomes capital only as the result of this movement.

Putting it another way, as the subject of the process capital appears as a subject of desire, as a pure difference of the two mediating value-forms, those of money and commodity. If money is the epitome of pure signifying demand, and, thus, the subtraction of the need as such, the extinction of all use-values, then money as capital appears as the surplus of this signifying demand, as a subject of desire propelling the entire process. The blockage of knowledge, termed by Marx “the capital fetish,” designates precisely this generative power of capital to conceive, as the subject of the process, the surplus of value over the value advanced. If we translate the increment of value, or surplus value (ΔM), into Lacanian algebra, we get the following formalisation:

$$\frac{M \rightarrow M'}{\$ \diamond a}$$

The circulation of capital ($M \rightarrow M'$), its movement, relies on the capital fetish, on the presupposition of a generative power of capital, of its inherent productive power generating surplus value (a) by virtue of being value. This support of capital's movement has the precise structure of fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$), which, in this case, is not merely the fantasy of a capitalist but equally concerns all the participants in the bourgeois society. This surplus enjoyment on the part of the Other (Capital), which lies at the core of the capital fetish, assumes the paradigmatic form of a gift as opposed to the logic of exchange. Insofar as the gift is to be situated outside exchange, and thought of as embodying pure excess, the capital fetish designates the fantasy of capital as generating a surplus of value in a pure act of giving, or transcending the laws of exchange. The surplus as an unfathomable gift of capital lies at the core of the capital fetish.

Gift and theft effectively form a privileged couple. The occultism of gift has its counterpoint in the evidentialism of theft, which counters

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18 Ibid., pp. 92, 179.

the market fanaticism, or capital fetishism, while in fact remaining on its terrain; a fact nicely indicated by workers' cooperatives as emblems of so-called market socialism. Under normal circumstances, the evidentialism of theft as a “workers” ideology appears if the wages no longer suffice to guarantee one's subsistence; it becomes truly palpable, however, in times of crisis. The ongoing crisis has, in fact, initiated the inversion of the occultism of the gift, of the liberal utopia of eternal growth and never-ending generative capability of capital, into the evidentialism of theft as masses of protesters, shouting slogans “Thieves!”, united in a fight against the corrupted capitalist political elites.¹⁹ As I have already indicated, these outbursts are not signs of a “traversing of the fantasy,” a sobering up in face of the exploiting nature of capital, but, rather, designate a turn into perversion, which, as père-version, “the version of the father” or, in this case, “the call to Capital,” remains enslaved by the very discourse it tries to escape. That is why Lacan's formula of perversion corresponds to the inversion of the formula of fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$):²⁰

$$\frac{M \rightarrow M'}{a \diamond \$}$$

The perverse evidentialism of theft, effectively, recapitulates the occultism of capital despite the fact that it reduces its mystical form to its supposedly “rational,” cynically-enlightened “truth.” Both paradigms, the phantasmatic and the perverse, in effect, rely on the presupposition of the antinomial relation between the logic of exchange and the logic of gift and theft. Both paradigms proceed from an antinomial relation between the signifier and enjoyment, hence reducing surplus accumulation to factors entirely external to the sphere of exchange, to

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19 The gift and the theft are essential categories of corruption; in it they flow into one another and become inseparable.

20 If we take a quick look at the critiques brought about by the current crisis in Slovenia (and elsewhere), we notice that they assume two basic forms that seem completely opposed to one another but which nonetheless rely on the same premise and are rooted in the same perverse inversion of the logic of fantasy. Conservatives and liberals emphasised the supposedly uninhibited role of the state as an economic agent, while social democrats stressed the lack of proper regulation. But both camps opposed the neutral market to the bad capital, which took on the form of either “the state as a bad owner” unwilling to leave the market to its own device, to its own autopoietic self-regulation, or the form of “usurious, fictitious, financial capital,” once again opposed to the neutral and the basically “good” free market. Both responses rely on a common utopian premise according to which we are searching for capitalism (a “good” market economy) without capital (the “bad” capitalists).

the logic of exchangeability, to the system of differences and cycles, to the qualitative order of resemblances and the quantitative order of equivalences.

Theft is the obverse of gift; it is the other side of desire and its phantasmatic support. Marx's shift from gift and theft to the concept of exploitation – the shift from the antinomial relation between signifier and enjoyment, which relies on the regime of transgression, to discursive enjoyment – is correlative with the move away from the logic of desire, which relies on fantasy, towards the drive and the logic of repetition. Theft and gift are rooted in a lack, which has to be given a double meaning. On the one hand, the object operative in theft and gift is nothing but a correlate of a lack: theft and gift introduce local points of absence adequate to the redistribution of signifying values.²¹ As such they do not escape the logic of exchange, the signifying order of value, but are rather entirely dependent on the correlation between values and the places of their inscription, on the basic differentiality of the system of equivalent exchange as such. In this respect they also figure as two privileged names for the blockage of knowledge, or the constitutive lack, conceived by Marx as capital fetish, which reacts to the deadlock of surplus-production by way of the occultism of the productive force of capital and its evidentialistic inversion.

The relation of theft and gift to lack has to be given another twist. I have said that from the point of view of the symbolic economy, or equivalent exchange, theft amounts to a changing of place, to a mis- or dis-placement. That which appears as loss at the one end counts as a surplus at the other. As Lacan points out in his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," the only things changing their places are signifiers redoubled by the place of their inscription as the place of their absence.²² Only that which one can displace has a place. Places are of what can go missing. Hence, the objects of theft and gift are essentially symbolic objects that in no way elude the symbolic web of translatability and equivalences. But, even though they remain caught in symbolic economy, they effectively present a constitutive exception to its rules. The object of theft and gift is lacking in its place. But, in the case of

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21 See footnote 10 above.

22 Lacan 2006, p. 17.

theft and gift, this lacking of the object at the place of its own inscription is not merely possible, but necessary, which means that it pertains to the very essence of theft and gift. The objects of theft and gift are structurally displaced; as soon as they appear they appear as missing in the place of their inscription. The fact of being out of place places them beyond all the other objects. An object remains stolen only as long as it remains out of place. A gift is a gift only insofar as it is uncalled for, out of place, and irreducible to our expectations. Therein lays the source of its effect of surprise: if a gift succeeds, it does so because we find it in a "place of no place;" we find it without ever searching for it. A gift is something that cannot be sought after – because it has no place. This inherent separation of the objects of theft and gift from the place of their inscription does not, however, place them outside the symbolic, but, instead, articulates an essential characteristic of the symbolic order as such, of its differentiality, the essence of the signifier being redoubled by the place of its own absence. Contrary to this, Marx depicts an object that is and is not in the sphere of circulation, at once placed and misplaced. Unlike the objects of theft and gift, which are not in their place, and unlike the usual signifying objects, which are or are not in their place, Marx's object – the surplus value – simultaneously is and is not in its place.²³

The evidentialistic inversion, as mentioned above, follows the logic of perversion. Let us take the example of the crisis. The capitalist crisis appears as a diminishing of accumulation, or the valorization of value. From the viewpoint of the capital fetish it, hence, appears as a fall in the productive power of capital, as capital's own powerlessness, undermining the occultism of the gift, the premise of capital's infinite generative potency. But the premise of capital's impotence, its "castration," relies precisely on its supposed productive power, its potency, and is nothing but capital fetishism in its (Hegelian) oppositional determination. Hence, evidentialism of theft as the apparent opposite of the occultism of gift is but the occultism of gift brought to its extreme. The premise regarding the impotence of capital is a mere consequence of the supposition of its potency, which,

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23 I cannot but mention at this point that in *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze effectively goes beyond the initial romanticism of theft and gift, moving towards a conceptualization of repetition that comes very close to Marx's views developed above. What Deleuze calls "virtual object" or "object = x" corresponds to the Lacanian concept of *objet petit a*, which, as Real, eludes the aforementioned logic of the Symbolic (see Deleuze 1994, p. 102).

in a displaced way, bypasses and masks once again the point of its impossibility. Crisis, thus, makes visible the lack pertaining to the symbolic sphere of circulation and remaining hidden beneath the veil of the capital fetish.²⁴ The evidentialism of theft relies on this dispositive; and even though its slogans seem to point towards the “castration” of Capital, towards unveiling its impotence, the evocation of theft, this obscure and dark enjoyment, effectively disavows “castration” and reintroduces into the Other the enjoyment of which it was stripped for a brief moment. Theft masks theft’s impossibility. A seeming dethronement of the Other is but a perverse strategy of its installment; an erasure of impossibility inscribed in its very core.

Repetition is not transgression, the surplus is not the correlate of theft; instead it implies a discursive production conceived by Marx as capitalist exploitation. And exploitation is not theft. It takes place against the backdrop of equivalent exchange, and even though it relies on exchange of a very specific commodity, namely labour-power, it doesn’t violate the laws of the world of commodities. Labour-power is the only commodity that produces value that exceeds the value of labour-power itself. However, this surplus is not an element of theft; it is formed under the conditions of the exchange of equivalents, which means that the worker receives from the capitalist the full value of his or her commodity, which – just as the value of any other commodity – is determined by the quantity of labour-time socially necessary for its (re) production. Thus, the capital fetish, the assumption of a productive force of capital, finds its structural support in the specific form of the wage as the equivalent of the value of labour-power. The wage, however, doesn’t appear as such; it takes on the mystical form of the value of labour (and not of labour-power), thus obfuscating the difference between the necessary, and the surplus, labour-time; that is, between, on the one hand, the labour-time in which the worker produces the value returned to him or her in the form of wage and, on the other, surplus labour-time, which is labour-time without equivalent, unpaid labour as the correlate of surplus value. If we return to the formula of capital from this perspective, we immediately see why interest-bearing capital is the ultimate form of appearance of the capital fetish. The interest-bearing capital, taken in itself, abstracts from the mediation of commodities and

24 “[I]n Freud a fetish conceals the lack (‘castration’) around which the symbolic network is articulated.” (Žižek 1989, p. 49)

amounts to the movement $M - M'$, in which money seems to immediately produce more money (Geld heckendes Geld, says Marx). However, what is overlooked here is the fact that the surplus, in the form of interest, is merely a part of the profit of the entrepreneur who used the borrowed money as capital and enriched it by purchasing labour-power.²⁵

Beyond the Parthenogenesis of Capital

After this detour, let us return to the problem of repetition and its surplus-object. The occultism of capital relied on the paradigm of desire grounded in fantasy, which, at its core, is always a fantasy of the subject’s fusion with surplus enjoyment. As such, fantasy introduces a relation in the place of a structural non-relation, of the inherent impossibility of incestuous enjoyment. And does the capital fetish, as the supposition of a self-valorizing power of capital, not stand precisely for a phantasmatic possibility of an incestuous enjoyment, as a supposed product of the parthenogenesis, or the virgin conception, of capital?

Slavoj Žižek proposed that the movement of capital corresponds precisely to the movement of the drive, or to its specific mode of satisfaction. Developing this thesis, he referred to Lacan’s distinction between the aim and the goal of the drive,²⁶ which implies a logic that remains irreducible to the logic of desire as something forever relying on the fantasy of incestuous enjoyment. As already mentioned, the purpose of simply commodity circulation is the satisfaction of need. This satisfaction lies outside circulation, which mediates the attainment of the object of satisfaction. The object of satisfaction (a useful thing or use-value) forms the goal, which is attainable by way of the circulation process. In contrast to this, the purpose of the circulation of capital is not the satisfaction of need that is extinguished with the attainment of the object of satisfaction, but rather the valorization of value, the accumulation of surplus, which is irreducible to the object of satisfaction. Capitalist circulation is entirely indifferent to use-values: its purpose is not the object resulting from the movement of exchange, but this movement itself as object. Capital finds its purpose in the

25 The developed version of the formula of interest-bearing capital ($M - M'$) is thus the following one: $M - M - C - M' - M''$. A lends money (M) to B, who now finances the production process (C), thus acquiring profit (M') and out of this profit repaying A his interests (M'') (see Heinrich 2012, pp. 155–159).

26 See Žižek 2006, p. 61, and Lacan 1998.

movement itself; its sole purpose is the aim abstracted from the goal as the object of satisfaction. The aim of capitalist circulation is not the object of satisfaction (use-value), but satisfaction as object (surplus value), to use Jacques-Alain Miller's apt formulation.²⁷

Simple exchange has its measure in need, and reaches its goal as the movement is terminated with the purchase of the object of satisfaction. The movement of capital, on the other hand, abstracts from the possession of this object (here, the object is bought only to be sold). It reaches its aim by by-passing its goal; it reaches satisfaction without reaching the object of satisfaction. This separation of goal from aim, this split pertaining to the drive, is what introduces the principle of repetition proper. For satisfaction is possible only under the condition of perpetual valorization of value. The process is met only when the money advanced (M) is valorized, and, thus, enriched for a surplus (M') and this surplus, this excessive supplement of surplus value, this satisfaction as object, is precisely that which functions as the object of repetition proper, repetition as the impossibility of repetition. As we have seen, the circulation process $M - C - M'$ doesn't work without the surplus. As soon as we deprive this movement of the increment of value, we also lose repetition itself, which can operate only under the condition of quantitative discordance of the two extremes (M and M'), only under the condition of a "failure" of repetition, that is, only at the price of the impossibility of affirmation.²⁸

Hence, the purpose of capitalist circulation is not money, but its surplus as the lever of the movement of the drive. Behind the proposed formulas of fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$), and its perverse inversion ($a \diamond \$$), we encounter the formula of the drive. Beyond the incestuous fantasy of a virgin conception of capital, of its productive power, beyond the capital fetish and its evidentialist-perverse inversion, we encounter the formula of the drive, which Lacan writes as $\$ \diamond D$, where D stands for demand, the formula placing the drive in a domain strictly beyond demand. If once again we conceive of money as a payment-capable demand, D

27 "It [drive] seeks satisfaction. The object that corresponds to the drive is satisfaction as object." (Miller 1996, p. 313)

28 For the precise structure of negativity implied in repetition as impossibility of (affirmative) repetition, see my paper (Hajdini 2014).

for demand can be replaced with M for money.²⁹ The goal of the drive of capital lies beyond money and strives for that which "in money is more than money itself," the pure increment of value, the partial object stemming from vertiginous, repetitive circular movement:

$$\begin{array}{c} S \diamond M' \\ \hline M \leftarrow a \end{array}$$

This formula is a clear contrast to the fetishised matrix of capital, supported by its parthenogenetic fantasy.³⁰ From this perspective we ought to, once again, take a look at the form of simple commodity exchange, whose supposed measure is the satisfaction of need, the attainment of the object of satisfaction, in a clear contrast to the circulation of capital, which aims at the satisfaction as object beyond the object of satisfaction.

The formula of simple commodity circulation never stands on its own. Rather, it is always-already kneaded by the other one, the formula of the circulation of capital. The logic of consumption is infected by the logic of accumulation; a (signifying) demand has always-already kneaded the need, and colonised it with a seed of desire. The moment it is introduced, the logic of capitalist valorization essentially alters the purpose and the dynamic of simple commodity circulation, attaching itself to it as its irreducible supplement. "In an advertisement," writes Mladen Dolar,

every commodity appears as more than a commodity, and the

29 In Slovenian, no such reformulation is necessary. We can simply read Lacan's D as D for money ("denar"). Yet another demonstration of the fact that Slovenian is an inherently Lacanian language?

30 The reader will perhaps notice that the first of the three formulas proposed in this article is consistent with Lacan's matrix of the master's discourse. I do not claim that the discourse of capitalism is reducible to the discourse of the master. I do, however, claim that we arrive at such an equation each time we succumb to the occultism of the capital fetish (and to the mystification of the wage-form). I hinted at this at the beginning of the present section by saying that Deleuze's romanticism of theft and gift implies a certain paradigmatic misunderstanding of the form of the social bond. Moreover, the perverse displacement of elements of fantasy gave us a matrix that is irreducible to any social bond, despite functioning as its inherent support. This is the source of the insufficiency of the proposed protest program; to quote John Milton's Sonnet XII: "Licence they mean when they cry liberty," "license" obviously pertaining to the standard repertoire of perversion. As for the final formula, it comes surprisingly close to what Lacan proposed one time only – in Milan on 12 May 1972 – as the matrix of the capitalist discourse (see Lacan, 1978, pp. 27-39).

object of the advertisement is precisely the staging of this “more.” It offers an ungraspable aura sticking to the materiality of the promoted commodity, which however lies beyond its “use value,” beyond the need that the commodity could satisfy. The satisfaction it offers is precisely the promise of satisfaction; it offers us the promise itself as satisfaction, thus perpetuating desire that it can sustain only by way of ever new promises.³¹

The guiding principle, the hidden (or not so hidden) lever of realisation of the payment-capable need, is never simply the use-value as such, the object of satisfaction, mere consumption of a commodity, but rather the surplus over its usefulness, the “in a commodity more than commodity itself,” that particular excess which lies beyond the need and addresses the consumerist’s desire. Hence, the logic of valorization of capital reaches into the very sphere of consumption; the latter is not simply external to the former, but, in fact, implies the continuation of its logic by different means. The sphere of consumption conforms, or adapts, to the sphere of circulation, the consumerist behaves as a capitalist, aiming not at the consumption of a commodity as a use-value, but, instead, at the consumption of the surplus, at the surplus-consumption beyond economic expenditure. The marketing discourse markets surpluses, it promises satisfactions, which however never seize in the satisfaction of the need: the promise of satisfaction is reduced to a “promise itself as satisfaction,” to quote once more Mladen Dolar’s precise formulation.

The notion of commodity as a “promise to satisfy” opens up a somewhat neglected conceptual link. Credit money is defined precisely as a “promise to pay.” Is a commodity as a “promise of satisfaction” or a “promise to satisfy” not a sort of credit commodity, colonising as it is every commodity from within as the spectral promise of surplus-satisfaction? And does the advertisement not function as a kind of marketing promissory note, wiped out by the act of purchase? In principle, marketing companies function as banks, creating out of nothing credit money as a promise of payment. The only difference is that marketing banks do not create credit money, but credit commodities or credit needs; they offer us a promise of satisfaction attached to the natural form of a commodity as its credit surplus. (Consumption

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³¹ Dolar 2012, pp. 42–43; my translation.

consists of a spiral of promises: commodities satisfy with a promise of satisfaction and are paid for with a promise of payment.) The term “promise of satisfaction” encapsulates the logic of desire situated in the interspace of promise and fulfillment. Desire relies on a promise of fulfillment, which, however, never passes into a fulfillment of promise, thus, keeping desire structurally unfulfilled. But, this dynamic of desire is inherently redoubled with the logic of the drive, which doesn’t rely on the promise of satisfaction but is satisfied by this promise itself:

Along with all the glittering new enjoyments they always try to catch us with the old enjoyment, avarice, the surplus that is intended not for consumption but for accumulation. Together with the pluses – the new advantages and enjoyments – we also buy the minus, that is, the saving. The saving is the surplus beyond surplus: the first surplus appears as “ever more,” embodied by the new product, and the second one appears as “ever less,” nevertheless offering “more.”³²

The aura of surplus enjoyment, its attractive packaging luring the desire into ever new purchases, structurally vanishes with the act of purchase, hence triggering desire’s search for ever new surpluses, ever new promises of an eternally delayed and displaced satisfaction. Here, however, we witness a different logic, one redoubling the first one and transforming the surplus as the lever of desire into the object of the drive. The object of the drive, which is nothing but a quite literal embodiment of a void, is merely a minus, a saving, stemming from the very movement of exchange. Just as credit money effectively functions as money, even though it is only a promise of payment, so too the promise of satisfaction already functions as satisfaction, as the lever of the satisfaction of the drive.

The double nature of the surplus detected by Dolar, corresponds precisely to the formulas of gift and theft proposed above. The credit commodity lying at the core of commodities as use-values and promising surplus-satisfaction, a satisfaction beyond the satisfaction of needs, has the precise structure of the gift received by the customer without having to pay for it; the surplus falls into the consumer’s lap as a gift, a result of the productive power of consumption:

.....
³² Ibid., p. 44.

$$\uparrow \frac{M \rightarrow C'}{\$ \leftarrow \Delta C} \downarrow$$

The schema corresponds to the schema of the capital fetish. I spend the money on a commodity that, however, is not only a use-value or a useful thing (C) but also the embodiment of a credit commodity indicated by the tiny index of surplus enjoyment (C'), a promise of satisfaction stemming from equivalent exchange as its surplus (ΔC), as the "in a commodity more than commodity." The purchase is a transformation of money-form into commodity-form of value, which, however, doesn't turn out but instead produces a surplus of its own, the excess of credit commodity over commodity as simple use-value. The lower floor of the schema is, once again, occupied by the formula of fantasy. Hence, the upper floor is irreducible to simple commodity exchange as the medium of the satisfaction of needs; instead, it always-already relies on the dispositive of desire as its essential, irreducible support:

$$\frac{M \rightarrow C'}{\$ \text{ } \emptyset \text{ } \alpha}$$

From here, we can move on to the second step proposed by Dolar, which reduces this ungraspable quality of the commodity to savings. This alteration corresponds precisely to the passage from the logic of gift to the logic of theft, or from the formula of capital's fetishism to its perverse inversion:

$$\frac{M \rightarrow C'}{\Delta M \text{ } \emptyset \text{ } \$}$$

To buy doesn't simply mean to spend money; the purchase effectively functions as an investment in savings. Money is not simply spent for a commodity (C) but is at the same time advanced for the saving, for the tiny surplus pertaining to the credit-form of a commodity (C'). In the act of exchange, money-form is transformed into commodity-form ($M \rightarrow C'$); this transformation takes place under the conditions of equivalent exchange, which means that in principle the buyer pays the true value of a commodity; but, in this very passage, a surplus is produced, a surplus in the form of a pure saving (ΔM). The surplus-quality of a commodity, marked by the tiny index (C'), is directly embodied in the saving that was snatched away from the Other as if in

an elegant theft:

$$\frac{M \rightarrow C'}{\alpha \text{ } \emptyset \text{ } \$}$$

Hence, the movement of the act of purchase doesn't form a closed cycle of need and satisfaction; instead, it forms a doubly open cycle. This cycle is traversed by two processes: the economy of desire sustained by the promise of satisfaction and unclasping the circle of need by way of being inherently unsatisfied; and a perverse economy of accumulation of savings as an end in itself forcing us into perpetual renewal of the act of purchase. However, just as the object of capital is irreducible to a particular sum of money added to the money advanced, as it strives for infinite valorization, so too the purpose of the production of savings is irreducible to the sum saved and embodied in the money-form, as it instead strives for its mere increase, an increase in savings. Hence, the consumerist drive is to be situated beyond needs:

$$\frac{S \text{ } \emptyset \text{ } C'}{M \leftarrow \alpha}$$

The goal of consumption lies beyond the commodity, and beyond the savings, striving as it is for the increment, the partial object stemming from the very circulation of exchange. Once again, at the very core of equivalent exchange there lies repetition, as the impossibility of repetition, repetition as the blockage of affirmation, epitomised by the impossibility to translate the money-form (M) into the commodity-form (C) without a leftover (α).

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The Idea of the Passe: Critique and Construction in Psychoanalytic Thinking

Gabriel
Tupinambà

ABSTRACT:

The present contribution seeks to develop the basic determinations of the procedure of the *passe*, invented by Lacan in 1967, in order to investigate the usefulness of this idea for a rethinking of the *productive* dimension of psychoanalysis. This project, which makes use of several concepts developed by Slavoj Žižek, has the collateral effect of also clarifying the constructive dimension of the Žižekian theory of the act.

Keywords:

symptom, analytic act, testimony, transmission

1. What is a clinic?

Though I will be focusing here on the *passe*¹, this strange mechanism invented by Lacan in 1967, I would like to begin with some words about a very important category. Briefly, I would like to address the question: *what is a clinic?*

After all, even though psychoanalysis proposes a radical subversion of the medical setting, it does so in the name of a different clinic, not of a rupture with the idea of clinical treatment. Ultimately, the entry door for psychoanalysis remains, as in any other clinical procedure, the problem of suffering - which is also why the “psychoanalytic apparatus” can not simply disregard the claim that it produces and determines a certain form of subjectivity. Criticisms such as those found in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* or Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* cannot simply be dismissed on the grounds that psychoanalysis has no claim to power or rather that its critical potential lies on its purely negative dimension. The transformation of one’s suffering into a subjectivized question, a necessary step into the transferential setting, indelibly marks the entry point into the clinical work and confronts us with a rather undeveloped dimension of

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¹ This text was based on a lecture presented at the Žižek Conference, in 2014 - the material has been thoroughly reworked, with the help of Yuan Yao, Srdjan Cvjetanin and Agon Hamza. This presentation maps the current stage of an ongoing research about the productive and propositional dimension of psychoanalytic thinking and the possible development of an axiomatization of psychoanalysis - if the reader would like to contribute to the further elaboration of these theses, please contact me at: gabriel.tupinamba@egs.edu

psychoanalytic thinking: the fact - already pointed out by Freud in his pre-psychoanalytic texts - that the engagement with an indeterminate or groundless practice somehow *contributes to the efficacy of the treatment*:

“An intelligible dissatisfaction with the frequent inadequacy of the help afforded by medical skill, and perhaps, too, an internal rebellion against the duress of scientific thought, which reflects the remorselessness of nature, have in all periods (and in our own once more) imposed a strange condition on the therapeutic powers alike of persons and of procedures. The necessary faith only emerges if the practitioner is not a doctor, if he can boast of having no knowledge of the scientific basis of therapeutics, if the procedure has not been subjected to accurate testing but is recommended by some popular prejudice. Hence it is that we find a swarm of ‘nature cures’ and ‘nature healers’, who compete with physicians in the exercise of their profession and of whom we can at least say with some degree of certainty that they do far more harm than good. If this gives us grounds for blaming the patients’ faith, we must yet not be so ungrateful as to forget that the same force is constantly at work in support of our own medical efforts.”²

At the origin of psychoanalysis, there was an insight into the productive dimension of *the patient's engagement with the indeterminate* - and Freud's claim that his scientific project would set about “restoring to words a part at least of their former magical power”³ further reinforces the necessity of considering psychoanalysis not only as a critical process, but also as an affirmative procedure, concerned with the inscription of a novelty in the world. In other words, perhaps the proper approach to the criticism that psychoanalysis produces the subject that it simultaneously intends to treat should be not to resist it, but to take it even further: psychoanalysis has discovered that one's engagement with novelty *has therapeutic effects*. But let us backtrack a bit.

Following Christian Dunker's seminal work, *The Constitution of the Psychoanalytic Clinic*⁴, I would like to propose that the category of the clinic is one which articulates together four components: a *semiology* - a

.....
2 *Psychic (or Mental) Treatment* in Strachey 1953: 285

3 Ibid: 283

4 Dunker 2010

procedure for reading signs - a *diagnostics* - a procedure for interpreting signs - an *etiology* - that is, a theory of causation and determination - and, finally, a *therapeutics* - which is both a method for intervention and a theory of what it means to have succeeded in doing so, that is, a theory of what constitutes a cure. But perhaps even more importantly, the category of the clinic organizes these four components according to two fundamental rules: a principle of *co-variance* and a principle of *homogeneity*⁵. These two rules allow us to relate the four components as an abstract group:

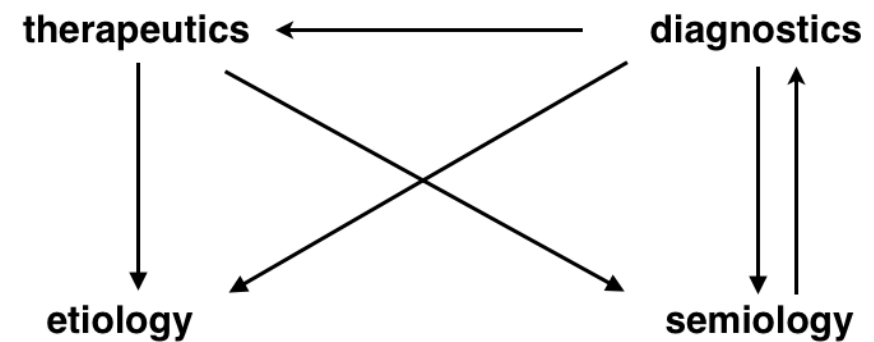


fig.1

This means, first, that a change in any one of the four clinical dimensions will lead to changes in the remaining ones: considering the medical clinic, for example, if we start to consider certain new traits of the patient as significant indicators, this will affect our diagnosis, as well as how we intent to intervene upon the causes of the disease and on what consequences can be considered a sign of a successful treatment. This is the co-variance condition. The second rule, that of homogeneity, is equally important - it states: there must be a material homogeneity between the *site of intervention* and the *intervening principle*. That is, if our etiology singles out chemical imbalances as the cause of a certain condition, then our therapeutic principle of treatment will also be of chemical nature. In other words, the homogeneity rule dictates that the treatment must have the *same ontological consistency* as what it treats.

.....
5 Ibid: 210

I will not go into the precise differences distinguishing the medical and the psychoanalytic clinics. The premises of the modern medical clinic are clearly stated in Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*. In order to succinctly define the analytic subversion of these principles, it suffices to say that, by turning its attention from the physical body towards speech, psychoanalysis found out that, as far as psychic suffering is concerned, the *other who is supposed to know* - supposed to recognize the signs, supposed to tell the patient "you have such and such disease", supposed to include the suffering into a causal chain connecting an early trauma to a current symptom, and supposed to expect the patient to adequate itself to a certain normative criteria of happiness or health - this other is *part of the pathology*. In a certain sense, the frame of the medical clinic falls into what it is supposed to frame, just as the so-called "imaginary body" itself falls into the picture⁶.

Still, throughout this subversive operation, the co-variance rule is respected - given that the analyst must listen carefully to the invariances which characterize the otherness implicated in the patient's speech in order to discern between radically different subjective structures, which, in turn, leads to very different approaches to the treatment, and so on. More importantly, the homogeneity rule is equally maintained: the hypothesis of the unconscious is, first and foremost, a hypothesis about the form of certain psychopathologies - pathologies which are made of an otherness inherent to speech itself, a material otherness that Lacan would later call *enjoyment*. The analytic punctuations, scansions, and interpretations must, therefore, be *of the same form as what they treat*. This is why Lacanian analysis privileges equivocity, non-sense, allusive figures, silences: these are some of the recourses of language which have the same form of otherness as enjoyment and which are, therefore, capable of "dislodging" its fixation.

This is what we must have in mind as we proceed: first, the role of the Other as inherent to the structure of the analytic clinic - that is, this idea that the Other which serves as the fixed-point of correlations of signification, at the semiological level, correlations of identification, at the diagnostic level, of processes of entailment, at the etiological level, and of the criteria for what "normal" means, is now *included* in the clinic. And second, the shared consistency between the cause of pathologies

.....
6 Lacan 1978

associated with desire and the psychoanalytic act - the Wagnerian principle that "only the spear that inflicted the wound can heal it". The latter is an important materialist principle that we will return to later on.

2. The category of the act in political thinking

The concept of the analytic act - also known as "the traversal of fantasy" - is broadly recognized as a fundamental cornerstone of Žižek's political project⁷.

In the first pages of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek proposes that we must supplement the critique of ideology as Althusserian "symptomal reading"⁸ with a concept of *ideological fantasies*⁹. If, on the one hand, the symptomal reading allows us to render legible what or who is the Other at stake in a given ideological identification - the Other which interpellates us, introducing us to the practical grammar of the different Ideological State Apparatuses¹⁰ - the ideological fantasy, on the other hand, concerns the material construction of this Other itself, as a screen which covers up the inconsistency of social relations¹¹. If the critique based on the symptomal reading is supposed to reveal the symbolic coordinates hidden behind the imaginary naturalizations proposed by a given discourse, the critique of ideological fantasies seeks to disturb the consistency of Otherness as such, that is, it brings into question an irresolvable impasse stabilized by the symbolic function of interpellation. In short, a critique oriented by the ideological fantasy asks not "which Other is implied in your practice?" but rather "how and

.....
7 Johnston 2009

8 Apropos of Marx's reading of Adam Smith: "a reading which might well be called 'symptomatic', insofar as it divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a different text, present as necessary absence in the first" in Althusser & Balibar 2006: 28

9 Žižek 1989

10 Althusser 2014

11 "Horror is not simply and unambiguously the unbearable Real masked by the fantasy-screen - the way it focuses our attention, imposing itself as the disavowed and, for that reason, all the more operative central point of reference. The Horrible can also function as the screen itself, as the thing whose fascinating effect conceals something 'more horrible than horror itself', the primordial void or antagonism. (...) The logic of the horror which functions as a screen masking the void can also be illustrated by the uncanny power of the motif of a ship drifting alone, without a captain or any living crew to steer it. This is the ultimate horror: not the proverbial ghost in the machine, but the machine in the ghost: there is no plotting agent behind it, the machine just runs by itself, as a blind contingent device. At the social level, this is also what the notion of a Jewish or Masonic conspiracy conceals: the horror of society as a contingent mechanism blindly following its path, caught in the vicious cycle of its antagonisms." Žižek 2007: 40

why do you contribute to the consistency of this otherness? Where does the efficacious force of its interpellation come from?”¹².

Furthermore, we can easily recognize here, as the correlate to the two analytic categories of symptom and fantasy, the two concepts of interpretation that intervene upon them: the analytic scansion, or transferential interpretation, as what intervenes at the level of our symptoms, bringing the Other implied in speech into play, and the analytic act, which implies the liquidation of transference, as what intervenes at the level of the fantasmatic screen protecting us from the confrontation with the castration of the Other¹³. Hence, Žižek’s thesis implies that there exists a requirement of the *political act* as the necessary correlate to the theory of ideological fantasy. This program gives rise to a crucial extension of the Althusserian critique of ideology, drawing its resources, once again, from psychoanalysis, but this time from the much more complex and unstable theory of the analytical act, as developed by Lacan between 1964 and 1970¹⁴.

However, this is not the complete picture. In order to grasp the full extent of Žižek’s supplementation of the Althusserian project, we should divide Žižek’s work into two periods. A first one, which we could call the “radical democracy” period, and a second, developed under the rubric of the communist hypothesis¹⁵:

radical democracy (1989 - 1997)	communist hypothesis (1997 -)
Millerian reading of Lacan (act as consistent interruption/openness)	Critique of Miller (the problem of the day after)
Ernesto Laclau (theory of social antagonism)	Alain Badiou (theory of fidelity)
critique of ideology = critique of religion	critique of ideology = critique of religion
political act ≠ its re-inscription	political act ↔ political organization

fig 2.

The first period, which goes roughly from 1985 to 1997, beginning

.....
12 See Mladen Dolar’s *Beyond Interpellation* in 1993: 75-96

13 A good introduction to the distinction between these two forms of intervention can be found in Pommier 1987

14 See *Vers un signifiant nouveau: our task after Lacan* in Hamza 2014

15 The first indication of this division has been provided by Žižek himself, in the second preface to *For They Know Not What They Do*.

with his doctoral thesis and ending just before the book *The Plague of Fantasies*, is marked by a clear concern with joining the theory of ideological symptoms with the theory of ideological fantasies. I would like to suggest that the main characteristics of this period are: (a) a Millerian reading of Lacan, based on his canonical seminar *From Symptom to Fantasy... and back*¹⁶; (b) a constant engagement with Ernesto Laclau, specially with his theory of social antagonism¹⁷; (c) a basic agreement with Marx’s assumption that the critique of religion is a good model for the critique of ideology. The political act is constructed here in accordance to the Millerian reading of the “traversal of fantasy” in Lacan, as the confrontation with the horror of the non-relation, with the Other’s castration, which the fundamental fantasy is constructed to cover up. Žižek’s reading of Laclau allows him to find a political correlate to this non-relation: the inconsistency of the social space. The political act would thus allow us to confront the “barred” dimension of sociality and therefore open the space for a radically democratic political experience which does not cover up the irresolvable political antagonisms at its very core. Furthermore, insofar as the critique of ideology shares important traits with the critique of religion, Žižek seems to maintain at this point a certain analogy between the realization that “there is no God” and Lacan’s famous statement “the big Other does not exist” - an analogy which suggests that the traversal of fantasy is inherently consistent as an operation: that is, once we cross the threshold of fantasy, recognizing the mechanism which, through our enjoyment, gave consistency to the Other, we would be able to directly relate to the production of mystifications without being duped by them, without assuming that the phantom of an Other agency was at play therein, just like the revelation that there is no God would automatically open a secular or atheistic perspective.

However, each one of these assertions is challenged by the “second phase” of Žižek’s work - the properly communist phase. This second period begins with his detailed analysis of the concept of phantasm in *The Plague of Fantasies* and, I believe, remains our horizon of thinking today. First of all, Žižek’s “Millerianism” is slowly self-criticized and many aspects of the more orthodox reading of Lacan are

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16 Miller 1982-1983

17 Laclau & Mouffe 1985

put into question - including Miller's theory of the traversal of fantasy¹⁸. Secondly, Laclau is no longer considered a privileged interlocutor - instead, we get a consistent and growing engagement with Alain Badiou¹⁹. This new interlocution does not mean that the theory of the real of social antagonisms, developed in the first period, should be discarded, but rather that it must now be supplemented by a theory of the *'day after'*²⁰ - a term which vaguely demarcates the Žižekian response to the Badiouian concept of fidelity. This is the fundamental shift which we will be tracking for the remainder of this investigation: from this point on, Žižek explicitly conditions the effectivity of the political act on our capacity to extract its consequences. The implications of this division of the act into the moment of rupture and its "day after" are profound, and we will explore the structure of this shift by turning our attention back to its conceptual origin in Lacan's teaching itself. But, first of all, we can already see one major consequence of this new position: from this standpoint, we can no longer treat the critique of ideology in the same terms as the critique of religion - in fact, in the Hegelian Christology that Žižek engages with, Christianity becomes a model not for what is criticized, but for the correct form of critique itself²¹. The way that, for Hegel, the act of Christ is internally dependent upon the community of believers that is only made possible because of that very act becomes, from this point on, an important model for his new theory of political acts, one that tries to intrinsically relate the analytic theory of act to Lacan's theory of the analytic social link²².

Still, the mutual dependence of political rupture and political organization seems, to most of us, rather extrinsic to Žižek's theory of the act, which is often opposed to Badiou's sophisticated theory

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18 Žižek 2001

19 Žižek 1999

20 "The success of a revolution should not be measured by the sublime awe of its ecstatic moments, but by the changes the big Event leaves at the level of the everyday, the day after the insurrection" in Žižek 2009a: 154

21 Žižek 2009b

22 "when Lacan introduces the term "desire of the analyst," it is in order to undermine the notion that the climax of the analytic treatment is a momentous insight into the abyss of the Real, the "traversing of the fantasy," from which, the morning after, we have to return to sober social reality, resuming our usual social roles—psychoanalysis is *not* an insight which can be shared only in the precious initiatic moments. Lacan's aim is to establish the possibility of a collective of analysts, of discerning the contours of a possible social link between analysts" Žižek 2006: 305

of the "generic procedures" as if the former would stop short of articulating an affirmative moment of the New, a supplementary step which characterizes the latter²³. This, I believe, is because while Žižek has separated himself from the Millerian reading of Lacan from this first period, we, who have not discerned this break ourselves, still try to extrinsically equate the first theory of the political act with the later concern with the "day after", or - what is worse- resort to criticizing Badiou's philosophy of the Event rather than properly deploying the parallel constructive resources of Žižek's most recent investigations.

What is essential to us is rather to investigate how the critical power of the act, its capacity to touch upon the inconsistency of the big Other, is conditioned by the patient work of organization and construction. To put it quite bluntly: in order to locate the place of the desire of the analyst, the catalyst of this act, within political critique, we must not look for ways of "punching the Other in the face", but rather ways of punching ourselves, ways to restrict ourselves. And constraints are a matter of political organization, of discipline, and, ultimately, a matter of ideas. In this sense, I would like to suggest that in the communist phase of Žižek's work, the problem of organization comes *before* the critique of ideological fantasies, even though it is itself *conditioned* by the political act.

But in order to think the intrinsic interdependence between the constructive and the critical dimensions of Žižek's political project, we must turn our attention back to psychoanalysis, and locate within its own thinking the idea of this paradoxical inmixing of continuity and rupture. This brings us, finally, to the Lacanian theory of the passe.

3. The idea of the passe

To begin with, let me briefly describe the institutional steps which compose the apparatus of the passe. Lacan introduced the passe in his crucial intervention, three years after the foundation of his School, called *Proposition of 9 of October 1967 on the Psychoanalyst of the School*

.....
23 Badiou himself differentiates their positions in similar terms: "My debate with Slavoj Žižek concerns the real. Following Lacan, he has proposed a concept of it, which is so ephemeral, so brutally punctual, that it is impossible to uphold its consequences. The effects of this kind of frenzied upsurge, in which the real rules over the comedy of our symptoms, are ultimately indiscernible from those of scepticism." Badiou 2009: 563

²⁴ - both the schematic abstraction of the moments of the *passe*, as well as all our remaining elaborations will be based solely on this initial presentation. We are, after all, concerned here not with the necessary adjustments made to this mechanism by the different Lacanian Schools throughout the last forty five years, but with the kernel of its *idea*.

An analysand comes to a point in her analysis which seems to her to constitute its limit and, led by this realization, decides no longer to occupy the position of an analysand in order to occupy that of an analyst. This decision is then communicated to the analytic School to which this analysand belongs, formalizing the wish to undergo the procedure of the *passe*. At this point, having crossed this crucial threshold of her analysis, the analysand assumes the position of *the passant*. The passant must then give a testimony concerning the trajectory of her analysis to other two analysts who, being in the same situation of passage, will be able to listen to her and to constitute themselves as *passers* of this testimony. Finally, the passers transmit this testimony to a *jury*, composed of three Analysts of the School (AS) - that is, three members of the School which are supposedly in position to turn the testimony into conceptually productive problems for psychoanalysis. It falls on this jury to authenticate the *passe*, nominating - or not - the passant as an AS herself.²⁵

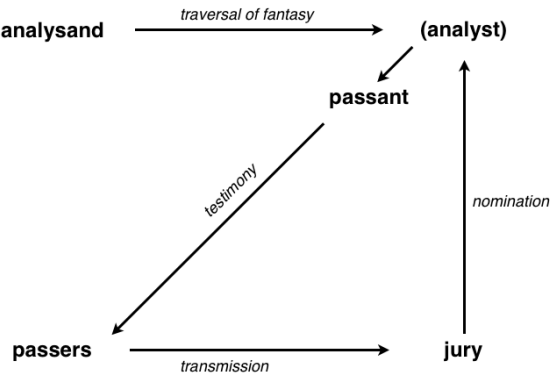


fig.3

.....
²⁴ Lacan 2001: 243

²⁵ Ibid: 255-256. Most of the terms which we will employ in this reconstruction of the theory of the *passe* are in fact extracted from the first dense description of its mechanism contained in these two pages from the *Proposition*.

The trajectory of the *passe* involves, therefore, one *passant*, two *passers*, three jurors, and the School. Furthermore, it articulates three different functions: (1) it gives rise - through a depuration that goes from *passant*, to *passer*, to juror - to a theoretical production about the singular and enigmatic passage of the subject from analysand to analyst; (2) it is also the institutional mode of nomination of an Analyst of the School; and, finally, (3) the *passe* sets the conditions for a new social link within the analytic community of the School, constituted by the transmission of the testimony of the *passant* to the remaining analysts, and the elaborations that this transmission ensues - for example, contributing to a renewed understanding of what the end of an analysis *can* be.

Let us now shift the presentation of this diagram, from the institutional instances towards the transformations that bind them, in order to bring to light the four different logics which together compose this idea:

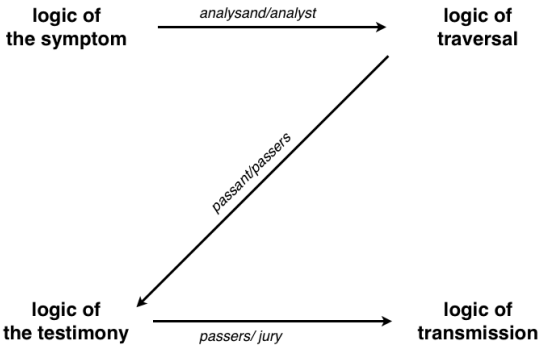


fig.4

We have, therefore, four logical moments: the logic of the *symptom*, of *traversal*, of the *testimony* and of *transmission*. Before we analyze each of its moments in some detail - an investigation which should provide us with important new information regarding the idea of the *passe* as such - we can already discern some interesting properties of this general schema.

The first aspect of this construction which is worth mentioning

is that we have, quite clearly, a division in the diagram between the instances articulated around an *impasse* (the first two) and those around the *passe* (the last two).

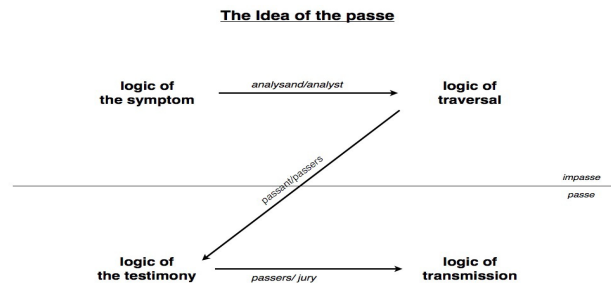


fig.5

The repetition of the deadlock of enjoyment, characteristic of the symptomatic repetition, and the assumption of a constitutive impasse of sexualization, at stake in the traversal of fantasy, are the two markers of a transformation which takes place between the analysand and the analyst, within transference and at its limit or liquidation. It is at this point that the division, previously proposed, between two Žižekian theories of the act, gains its Lacanian underpinning, because it is precisely the inconsistency of the traversal - the fact that it is not, by itself, an efficacious or verifiable process - that requires this first transformation to be supplemented by two other moments. The consistency of the act at the limit-point of analysis is therefore conditioned by, and divided between, these two other logics - the assumption of an impasse conditioned by what passes through it: the testimony, which challenges the ineffability of the act (through narration from passant to passers), and the transmission, which tests if the effectivity of the act survives beyond the singular position of enunciation of the subject at stake (through the transmission between passer and jury). The division between analysand and passant - the latter substituting the former as the logic of the passe comes to supplement the logic of the impasse - demarcates precisely this dependence of the desire of the analyst on these two new logical moments:

Another remarkable property of this schematism, properly

noticeable once we have divided it in two, is that, while on the upper side of the diagram we move from a sequential logic to a limit-point, on the lower one we have a totalizing operation first, the fiction of the testimony, and a sequential one afterwards, with the procedure of transmission. As we investigate each logic in more detail, this inversion will reveal itself to be quite rich in consequences, suggesting inter-relations between the two sides of the schema as well as an important result concerning the two principles of the clinic - co-variance and homogeneity - which we introduced at the beginning of this investigation. Ultimately, the complete presentation of the idea of the passe should clarify why it is that *the constructive practices of the passe condition the efficacy of the critical practices of the impasse*.

3.1 Logic of the symptom

The logic of the symptom is, at its core, a sequential logic, a process constituted by the relation between a series and a repetition. The very structure of failed signification - different attempts to grasp and signify a certain repeating elusive point - seems to give us its principle traits: woven out of the analysand's speech, the symptomatic logic is first and foremost one of *displacement*, of a return - within the themes of speech, within the scenes of one's life, and, ultimately, within the same analytic couch - of certain deadlocks, always repeated under different guises.

However, the crucial determination of this logic is precisely its indetermination: the *negative* rule which conditions it, the rule of free association, which suspends any extrinsic characterization of what should be said in analysis. The rule of free association is called "the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis" because it has the effect of promoting another rule, *one immanent to the analysand's speech*. Whatever repeats in analysis, given that it cannot be credited to a pre-established criteria of what should be said, becomes interpretable²⁶. This also allows us to define transference as such: the suspension of a clear rule of what is analytically significant transfers to the speaker the responsibility over the constants of her discourse, while, from within this indetermination, the speaker orients herself by supposing in the analyst a listener who would retain, in his silence, the true criteria of what is a significant speech. "Transferential interpretation" is precisely the name of an

.....
26 "only repetition is interpretable in analysis, and this is what we call transference" in Lacan 2006: 338

intervention that brings this *other criteria* into play, including it into the setting which was supposed to be framed by it.

An example. A young girl tells an analyst of her suffering: she has spent two years preparing herself to get a highly-esteemed job at a law firm and now that she has been accepted, she has missed several days of work, and finds no joy in it when she is there. In her explanations and elaborations, she addresses the analyst as someone who would find her position that of a spoiled girl, ungrateful for the opportunities that are given to her. She therefore reasons in accordance to this presupposition, driving her arguments and excuses as if the one listening to her identified her as someone who consistently threw away chances at a better life. After several sessions, not having found any explicit confirmation from the analyst that her discourse in fact signifies what she supposes it does, the analysand concludes a reasoning about the consequences of her behavior in the law firm by saying “this way I will never make a *desirable partner*”. The analyst’s intervention simply refers her statement back to her, a scansion which marks the ambiguity of her saying - partner in a law firm or partner as in someone’s companion? And, if so, desirable *according to whom*? This punctuation does nothing more than to include into the analysand’s speech the determination of an Other which is immanently implied in the series of her statements, thereby opening the space for a renewed elaboration - if the analysand in fact pursues its consequences. A different alterity demands signification now - namely, the question of what makes one a desirable partner - instead of the previous form of the impasse, which appeared as a desubjectified failure to enjoy her work, “as one should”.

This brief fragment is enough to demonstrate that the logic of the symptom is (1) defined by the displacement of symptoms, (2) and by the repetition of certain deadlocks or impasses (3) driven by the indetermination introduced by the rule of free association, which allows for a different rule to make itself legible and (4) marked by the scansions of the analyst which, intervening at the point of repetition, make the existence of this ungraspable other-rule legible to the speaker.

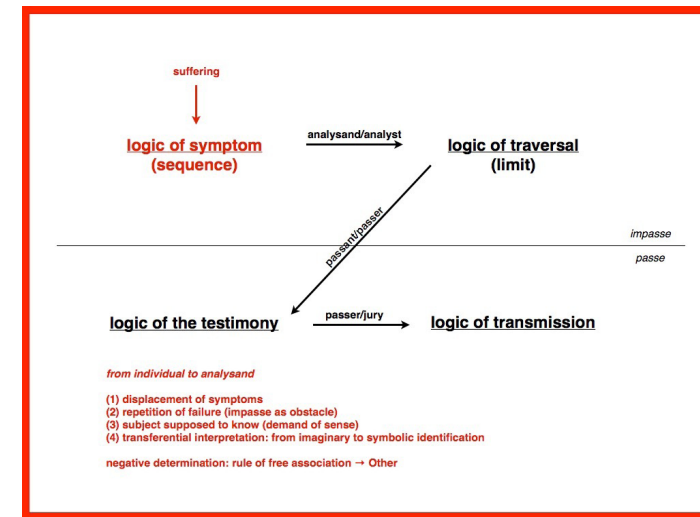


fig.6

Finally, it is crucial to note that pointing out this elusive second series of meaning - suddenly short-circuited by the term “desirable partner” in no way constitutes a *revelation* of a fully-constituted unconscious rule: the transferential interpretation goes far enough to include in our speech an other sense in which we do not recognize ourselves, but stops before any assertion of the consistency of this otherness, therefore implicating us in its promotion.

3.2 Logic of traversal

The logic of the symptom, as we have already seen, is operative from the moment that, through the analysand’s engagement with the rule of free association, an absence starts to count within the clinical setting: we suspend any positive determination of what is significant in the analysand’s speech, and in this absence the contours of another significance start to appear. The rule of free association *introduces an absence* into our speech, an absence which *renders legible* certain surprising regularities in what we say and the way we say it, regularities which are themselves the product of the analysand’s attempt to answer to a demand that she supposes in the analyst. Lacan conceptualized the conclusive moment of an analysis as the moment when the analysand would be able to let go of this absence as a consistent referent point,

an ideal point which organizes a “plane of identification”²⁷ - that is, as the moment “once desire has resolved who it was that sustained the psychoanalysand in his operation”. At this point, the analysand “no longer wants to take up the option, that is, the remainder that as determining his division brings about his fall from fantasy and makes him destitute as a subject”. The traversal of the plane of identification is the traversal of this absence as a frame for the significance of one’s speech - the traversal is articulated as a logical limit-point²⁸.

The whole problem is the following: how can one let go of one’s position regarding an *absence*? A quick example of this difficulty should suffice: consider the statement “there is no big Other”, this famous Lacanian formula for the traversal of fantasy - well, if there is no big Other *why are we negating it?* To position oneself as being “outside” or “without” the big Other is still to use it as a point of reference. Furthermore, as it is quite common in analysis, the experience of being “suddenly” struck by the inexistence of the big Other might very well be a way to remain identified with what we suppose an analyst wants from us (that is, to conclude that the big Other does not exist). Cynicism is born of nothing else²⁹.

This is why the traversal of fantasy is not simply a process of negation, but a *process of naming at the point of negation*. That is, the traversal of identification through the Other - of identification through the displacements of signification - can only be attested to by the formulation of a scene in which our position is tied up with the consistency of the Other. This is what the “construction of fantasy” stands for: the reduction of the repeating failure to signify, which spans throughout the sequential trajectory of analysis, into a formula which associates this failure - that is, the agalmatic “x” which remains enigmatic or lost in our speech - to the Other which has been constituted in its absence:

.....
27 Lacan 1978

28 A complete, but ultimately unsatisfactory, presentation of the traversal of fantasy in terms of sequence and limits is provided by Miller 2010: see classes 25/04, 09/05, 16/05 and 23/05/1990.

29 “The Ecole freudienne cannot fall into the humourless tough-guy attitude of a psychoanalyst whom I met on my most recent trip to the D.S.A. ‘The reason I will never attack the established forms’, he told me, ‘is that they provide me with a routine with no problems, and this makes me comfortable.’” in Lacan, J. (2001) p.259. For an innovative analysis of these closing remarks from the *Proposition*, please refer to Yuan Yao’s *Desire as a Fact of Reason*, available here: www.scilicet.com

“In this change of tack where the subject sees the assurance he gets from this fantasy, in which each person’s window onto the real is constituted, capsize, what can be perceived is that the foothold of desire is nothing but that of a *désêtre*, disbeing.

In this *désêtre* what is inessential in the supposed subject of knowledge is unveiled, from which the psychoanalyst-to-come dedicates him- or herself to the *agalma* of the essence of desire, ready to pay for it through reducing himself, himself and his name, to any given signifier.

For he has rejected the being that did not know the cause of its fantasy, at the very moment at which he has finally become this supposed subject of knowledge.”³⁰

An example: an analysand presented several symptomatic formations - dreams where he would rescue dead relatives, symptomatic vertigo of seeing others on the edge of balconies and stairs, an obsessive concern with sexually transmitted diseases and a series of failed relationships in which he always positioned himself as someone capable of taking care of his partner’s problems better than themselves. In analysis, he remembers a scene in which he appeared, as a two year old child, laying on top of his father, who was singing a song about the angel of annunciation (with whom the analysand shares the proper name) - the analysand further recalls that the vibration of the father’s voice made the contours of the child’s body palpable. This scene - regardless of whether it actually happened - only gained its importance when considered in the light of his symptoms, offering a meaningless name, rather than a signification, to bind them together: to speak in the place of a *silence* (over dead relatives), to experience vertigo *for another*, to provoke/avoid sexual *transmission*, to position oneself as the Other’s *spokesperson* - the elements in this sequence revealed themselves to be bound together in a scene where the child identified as the one who *announces* the Other - “annunciation” being a word which both registers the subject’s position as a messenger for the Other (for the alterity that is characteristic of the father, of the woman, etc) as well as the one who *makes the Other public* (publicizes, markets, makes consistent its semblance). In announcing the difference in the symbolic, the subject would never be implicated in the real of what is announced.

The formulation of this fantasy - “being the Other’s spokesperson”

.....
30 Ibid: 254

- also points to the traversal of this identification: after all, *from which position* could this scene be named if it remained the outer frame of the analytic process? If the rule of free association makes the absence of the Other the rule of signification, the traversal of fantasy formulates a scene in which signification itself is suspended by an *equivocal name* - here, "annunciation" - which is able, simultaneously, to mark a certain common thread binding together the sequence of symptomatic displacements *and* to mark the point of its repeating failure: the speaking being announces the Other (passes on the message), but, there where there is no Other, he announces (publicizes, "markets") it. The subject could not signify himself in his speech if not through the Other (the impasse at the level of the symptom), but now the equivocity fixated by the formula of the phantasm attests to the same impossibility at the level of the Other (the impasse at the level of fantasy) - at the cost of the subject's localization therein, and its appearance as a remainder, destituted from its place in the Other and reduced, in its act, to a voice which, not carrying forward the message of an "Other difference", is a voice and nothing more. At this point, reduced to what is left outside of identification, the analysand has effectively traversed for the first time his place in the absent Otherness that kept the transferential relation at play, and the possibility has arrived from him to occupy the position of indetermination that is proper of the analyst - insofar as it is defined, precisely, as that of *not positioning oneself on behalf of the Other*³¹.

In short, the logic of traversal is composed by (1) a figuration of the repeating impasse of signification through a formal act of naming that preserves its equivocity; (2) a traversal of the fantasy of a consistent Other ruling the signification of the impasse through the depositing of the equivocity of the name in the Other itself, (3) the separation of the impasse at the heart of speech from the supposition of this consistent Other - thereby liquidating the condition of transference and (4) the movement from symbolic identification to subjective destitution:

.....
31 "The schema that I leave you, as a guide both to experience and to reading, shows you that the transference operates in the direction of bringing demand back to identification. It is in as much as the analyst's desire, which remains an x, tends in a direction that is the exact opposite of identification, that the crossing of the plane of identification is possible, through the mediation of the separation of the subject in experience. The experience of the subject is thus brought back to the plane at which, from the reality of the unconscious, the drive may be made present." in Lacan 1978: 274

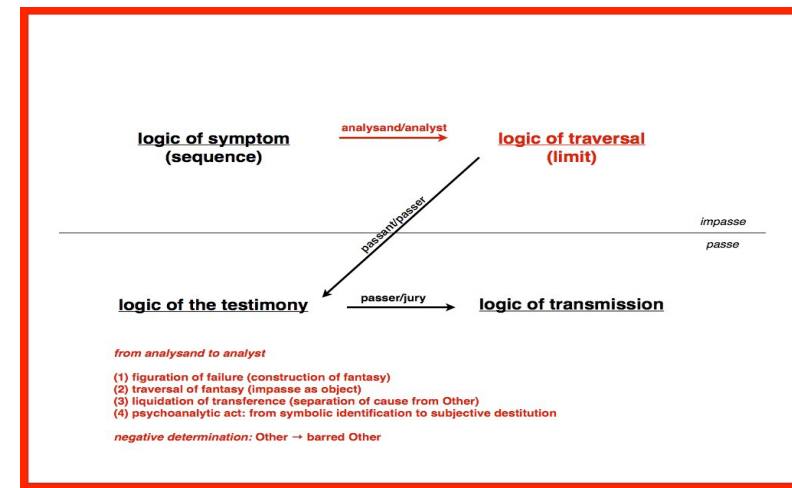


fig.7

However, insofar as this process suspends a certain fundamental relation between desire and the consistency of the Other, two questions are at hand: first, if the traversal of fantasy deposes the Other as a guarantee of meaning, does it mean that, as a meaningless naming, it is an *ineffable* or *exceptional* experience? Second: if the traversal of fantasy shifts the guarantee away from the Other back to an elusive dimension of the analysand's speech, the real which infuses it with its equivocity, does it mean that the cornerstone of the traversal, that which emerges as beyond the consistency of the Other, is solely the *position of enunciation* of the subject?

If the answer is positive on both accounts, then the process of separation from our grounding on the Other³² is essentially a private experience - and, in fact, the very impossibility of *verifying* it would be its proof: after all, the traversal of fantasy would produce something that does not register in the shared symbolic space, and the impossibility of sharing it would be one of its defining properties. At best, we could hint at it, perhaps with the use of the same equivocal means which allowed for the traversal itself. On the positive side, this would make the limit-point of analysis the conclusive end of the analytic trajectory - to be able to maintain that something that does not inscribe itself in the Other has taken place would already be the production of a singular desire (one

.....
32 Ibid: 218-219

that does not rely solely on the Other's determining coordinates). The capacity to bear absolute loneliness would be one of the markers of this experience - a loneliness further confirmed by the position of the analyst, which the subject now takes up, of a desire that keeps itself at a distance from identifications³³.

The idea of the *passe*, however, is, first and foremost a *negative* answer to both questions and a wager that the end of an analysis can be verified without (a) being guaranteed by the Other and (b) without being a mere local convention established by a School.

3.3 The logic of testimony

One of the most common forms of expression of neurotic suffering is the grammar of exceptionality: to delimit our place in the Other through a trait that distinguishes us from everybody else, positively or negatively. To be “too perfectionist”, to enjoy things that “no one gets”, and so on - the grammar of exception offers a way to “include ourselves out” of the Other, to negatively locate our place in the Other without thereby confronting us with the Other's own exclusion from itself³⁴. Such is, after all, the ultimate role of the neurotic fantasy: to allow us to engage in the public shared symbolic space, where nothing uniquely distinguishes us in our “very being” while, privately, constructing a frame through which we are able to locate ourselves as exceptionally positioned in the Other³⁵. The logic of the testimony is a necessary supplement to the analytic act precisely because it allows us to distinguish the traversal of fantasy from the private fantasy of exception which precedes it.

Furthermore, the testimony of the *pass* operates a strange dialectical twist upon both the logic of the symptom and that of the traversal: if the sequential logic was characterized by the *alienation* of the subject in the Other and the logic of traversal by its *separation*, the logic of the testimony requires the presentation of *separation as alienation*. To put it bluntly, the testimony requires us to place ourselves precisely at the spot which the traversal has ungrounded: if there is no big Other, *then nothing prevents us from producing a consistent fiction of one's analysis*,

33 Alemán 2012

34 Miller 1998 - unpublished translation available at: www.scilicet.com

35 McGowan 2013: 126

tying the sequence to its limit point. This is, perhaps, a productive way to understand Žižek's recent theory of the “self-erasing Event”³⁶: an event which marks such a radical suspension of causation that *its only effective vestige is the establishment of a self-causation by the subject in the guise of an external causation*.

This torsion of the sequence and limit, into a “sequence-limit”, a fiction which binds the series and the conclusion, places the testimony as a substitute for something which does not exist: an Other capable of discerning the immanent rule of the analysand's speech. In a certain sense, the supposition that the analyst would be capable of judging our trajectory in analysis is now confirmed - but the analysand is herself the one who occupies that place, both as the one determined by a certain formula and as the one who alone guarantees its consistency. The testimony attests to our unconscious determinations by providing the passers, to whom this narration is addressed, with a selection of symptoms, dreams and scenes that are shown to be tied together by a certain reduced formula, but it also attests to our determination of the unconscious insofar as it requires decisive selection from the vast material that composed the sequence of analysis, as well as the *forcing of entailment* there where there was none: at the point between sequence and limit, between signification and naming, as if the construction of the fantasy, which was a product of analysis, was *always already* at play in the material that preceded it. Lacan calls this the “hystorization” - a hysteric history - of analysis³⁷: a sort of return to transference which has not an analyst as reference, but *psychoanalysis itself*.³⁸

The production of this narrative plays yet a third and fundamental role: not only does it demonstrate that the subject can return to the unconscious formations of her analysis from the position of a minimal distance, speaking about them without being implicated therein, not

36 Žižek 2007b: 28-33

37 See the preface for the english edition of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, available in Lacan, J. (2001). See also Miller 2007 - available at: http://www.lacan.com/symptom/?page_id=226

38 “We thought, with Freud and after Freud, that once this parenthesis was closed, one nevertheless had to continue to be analyzed, without the analyst, in solitude. One would go back to it, occasionally—regularly, Freud wished—for a period of time. To taste again a little of the transference unconscious. The other solitary one, Lacan, imagined another route, that of establishing a relationship to the analytic cause. Designed as the second pass, oriented in the opposite sense. Attention! Not a new transference for the analyst. The transference to analysis.” Miller 2007

only does it exercise itself at the point of a hole in the Other, which, incapable of guaranteeing the truth of fiction, is equally incapable of guaranteeing its falsity, but the narrative of the testimony also attests to one's "relationship with the analytic cause"³⁹. The testimony offers itself as an example of the Freudian categories - a local proof of the hypothesis of the unconscious - but it also includes, on account of the singularity of the subject and of the socio-historic determinations of its specific context, *new challenges for psychoanalytic thinking*.

A good example of this third aspect (the other two being already exemplified by our summary account of the end of analysis in the previous section) can be seen in the case of a recent passant who concluded his analysis in Brazil. In his testimony to the passers he retold a scene from his childhood in which his grandfather killed a chicken in a religious ritual as an offering to a spirit. Now, from the standpoint of "civilized" France, where his testimony would later also circulate, the reference to sacrificial rituals and spirits would be read as a clear indication of his grandfather's psychotic delirium and of a foreclosure on the side of the subject, were this situation to reverberate for him as a reality - but this was clearly not the case, if one considers the particular culture in which this subject was brought in, and especially if one considers the singularity of the subject in question - for whom this scene had the metaphorical role of condensing a certain relation to the Other sex. So, even though the testimony did produce a sequence-limit, binding this and other scenes and unconscious formations around the figure of a "chicken man" (both a coward, a man curious about death and women, etc), it also posed a problem for thought: what are we to do about religious beliefs from the standpoint of psychoanalysis? To be even more precise: what does psychoanalysis think when it confronts the enigmatic fact that pauperized populations of the third-world are prone to narrate the experience of religious visions without this thereby constituting a psychotic structure?

It is crucial to note that the testimony is not the narration of a segment of analysis to one's analyst (who, within transference, we supposed to be in a position to assess the truth of this retelling) nor to an aleatory audience: the two passers compose the minimal form of an audience whose principal interest is to *recognize* if analytical work has

.....
39 Lacan 2001: 229.

taken place. To be able to provide this audience with an *example* - in the full sense of the term: a particular case of a universal that nevertheless says more than the universal itself⁴⁰ - is a way to *simultaneously be recognized by other analysts* (one's analysis confirms the hypothesis of the unconscious) *and to make existing analysts not recognize themselves* (insofar as psychoanalysis now includes a new problem).

The logic of the testimony (1) affirms separation through a minimally-different alienation: returning to the symptomal sequence, but (2) at the same time it affirms the Freudian theory of alienation at the points of the separation permitted by the traversal: it attests to the inexistence of the big Other by producing a fictional construction that takes its place. Furthermore, (3) the dialectical fold of alienation onto separation and of separation onto alienation, bound together in the narration of the passant, turns the constructible, fictional and entailed properties of the testimony into a proof of the act's truth and lack of causation. And, finally, (4) the testimony also opens up the question of the passant's engagement with psychoanalysis, of his transference not with the analyst, but with the analytic apparatus itself⁴¹, from which the passant both demands recognition and reinvention.

Considering these four characteristics of the testimony - as well its interdependence on the two logical moments which preceded it - we can add a new qualification to our general schema of the Idea of the passe:

.....
40 "the example is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same type and, at the same time, it is included among these. It is one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all. On one hand, every example is treated in effect as a real particular case; but on the other, it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity." Agamben 2007: 9-10

41 See the preface for the english edition of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, available in Lacan 2001. In *La Passe Bis*, Jacques-Alain Miller considers this "return to the transferential unconscious", after the confrontation of the "real unconscious" at the end of analysis, as a shift from the transference with an analyst to the transference to psychoanalysis as such in Miller 2007

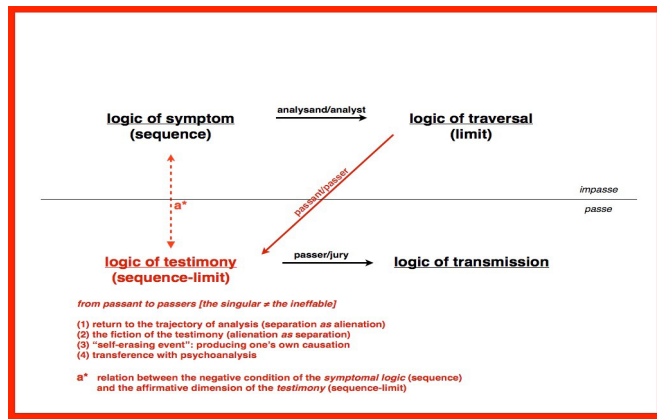


fig.8

This is our first glimpse at an “affirmative” condition of the act: the logic of the testimony is responsible for reintroducing the fiction of causation there where there was none, for attesting to the reality of the unconscious from its hypothesis, and to inscribe new phenomena and problems into psychoanalysis - a practice of inscription upon which the very existence of what preceded it - a ceaseless lack of inscription - is conditioned. There will not have been an analytic act if the subject cannot pass at the point of the Other’s impasse (reconstructing a sequence whose internal entailment is indiscernible), force the Freudian truth into the world (turn a fragment of her life into an example) and cause psychoanalysis to reinvent itself.

But if the logic of testimony depurates the analytic act from its ineffability, substituting it for a complex engagement with psychoanalysis, one problem remains: the testimony remains tied to the position of enunciation of the analysand-turned-passant - that is, if the analytic act has produced a name that finds no signification in the Other, then is its inscription solely supported by the position of enunciation of the passant?

3.4 Logic of transmission

The fourth moment of the trajectory of the passe - the second one to supplement the analytic act - takes place in the absence of the passant: it is the task of the two passers to transmit to a jury composed of three members of the School something of the traversal of the analysand’s fantasy. However, following our basic insight concerning the relation

between the procedure of the passe and the analytic act, it is crucial to note that the logic of transmission *participates in the consistency of what it transmits*.

The product of the testimony is not only a narrative composed of selected scenes of the sequential and limit-points of analysis. What turns the report of one’s analysis into something more than the convenient confirmation that the universal categories previously elaborated by psychoanalysis apply to this particular case - a confirmation which would justify the Foucaultian critique of psychoanalysis as a control-apparatus - is that the testimony is also the testimony of a new problem, of something that, having no place in the Other, *can possibly have a place in psychoanalytic thinking*. This is what characterizes the testimony with its *exemplary* dimension:

”the way to overcome an idea is to exemplify it, but an example never simply exemplifies a notion; it usually tells you what is wrong with this notion. This is what Hegel does again and again in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He takes a certain existential stance like aestheticism or stoicism. Then how does he criticize it? By simply stating it as a certain life practice, by showing how the very staging actualization of this attitude produces something more which undermines it. In this way, the example always minimally undermines what it is an example of”.⁴²

The question that now must be dealt with - and which justifies the absence of the passant in the process of transmission - is the following: is the excessive dimension of the example the uniqueness of the subject which produced it or is this excessive dimension a constitutive part of the example? The separation of the testimony from the position of enunciation of the analysand in the logic of transmission confronts the mechanism of the passe with a fundamental challenge: to condition the inconsistency of what is transmitted - the inconsistency that marked the place of the subject in the testimony - on something other than speech. This means that that fundamental wager of the logic of transmission is to produce a form of *thinking* that carries over certain properties of speech (the “determinate indetermination” of the subject in the signifying chain) into a new working hypothesis - a passage that Lacan

.....
42 Žižek & Daly 2004: 44

calls “transference of work”⁴³. This wager gives rise to the main task of the jury: to assess if the transmission of the passant's testimony by the passers, a transmission which transforms the content of the sequence-limit narrative, can remain indeterminate in a singular way *by being organized around a challenge for psychoanalytic thinking*.

This passage from speech to thought turns the name which localized for a given subject the inconsistency of the big Other - that is, which named something which does not write itself - into the pivot of a new inscription, no longer guaranteed by the Other, but by the community of analysts. This is why the passage from the logic of traversal to the logic of transmission is fundamentally the shift from the thought implicated in the analysand's speech to the thought that might influence a *new way of listening* - a passage that, impossible to be impartially attested to or verified, can nevertheless be verified by *anyone engaged with the hypothesis of the unconscious*. It completes a process that, beginning with the exceptional point (the symptomatic sequence) ends up with the construction of a common indetermination.

The logic of transmission conditions the efficacy of a singular analytic act on its capacity to motivate a common work, which forces new determinations at a point without external guarantee. This work, which qualifies this logical moment as a “limit-sequence” - that is, a sequence which carries forward a limit-point, the challenge to rethink psychoanalysis anew - ultimately conditions the act, and its capacity to produce an analyst, a position “warned” against identifications, on the challenge to organize a community around a problem.

The nomination of an analyst by the jury - instead of being directly tributary to the traversal of fantasy itself - is an *enrichment* of the determinate indetermination proper of the desire of the analyst. Rather than defined solely by the analysand's newfound capacity to assume the ontological inconsistency of the Other, the position of the analyst is now constituted as being a complex composite of (a) personal analysis

.....
43 “The teaching of psychoanalysis can only be transmitted from a subject to another through the path of a transference of work (...) No doctrinal apparatus, most notably our own, as useful as it might be in orienting our work, can preconceive or determine the conclusions which will be its remainder” in Lacan 2001: 236

(traversal), (b) subjective engagement (testimony) and (c) collective work by the analytic community. The corollary of this conception of the desire of the analyst is that, if there is no analytic community, there can be no analysts.

The affirmative work of transmission, which forces itself at the point of impasse unveiled by the traversal, and the conditioning of the desire of the analyst on the complete circuit of the passe allow us to return to our schema of the passe and add to it two new determining arrows:

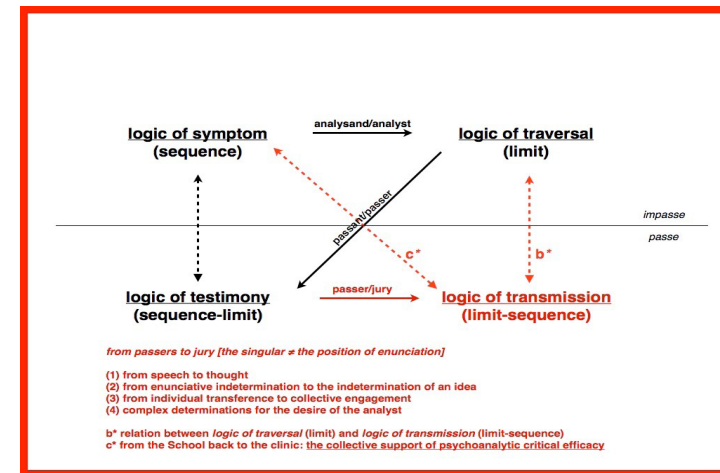


fig.9

Let's now consider some properties of this schema when considered as a whole, and then proceed to relate it, at least tentatively, to the critical and constructive dimensions of the Žižekian theory of the political act.

3.5 General determinations of the idea

We began the analytic of the passe by following the three shifts in the number of people involved: two (analysand, analyst), then three (passant and two passers) and then five (two passers and three jurors). These shifts led us to discern four different logics which compose the trajectory of one's analysis: from analysand (symptomatic logic), to “potential” analyst (traversal), to passant (testimony) and to nominated analyst (transmission).

In the description of this circuit, we came to discern certain internal relations between its moments, of two kinds: supplementary and speculative relations. The supplementary relations (a* and b*) bind together the suspension of extrinsic rules, at the level of the impasse, with the construction of new rules, at the level of the passe - the relation between the negative determination of the symptomal logic (rule of free association, which suspends entailment) and the affirmative determination of the testimony (the narrative which forces entailment *because* there is none), or the negative determination of traversal (there is no big Other to serve as addressee of one's singularity) and the affirmative dimension of transmission (the School can be the addressee of these novelties *because* there is no big Other).

The speculative relation (c*) is the one that appears as the completion of the circuit, and takes the form of the speculative judgement "the analyst is the analysand". Throughout the circuit of the passe, which conditions the separative act that constitutes the position of the analyst on the separation from the ineffable (testimony) and the separation from the speaking body (transmission), the form of the desire of the analyst *is enriched with new determinations*. So that the analyst who, having gone through the process, now permits a new analysand to speak under the rule of free association is not the same as the analyst who first allowed him to turn his suffering into a question. The local shift from analysand to analyst, if it goes through the complete circuit of the passe, *brings with it a minimal difference into the position of the analyst itself*.

The consideration of the speculative relation which binds the suffering of an analysand with the desire of the analyst is the nodal point of this whole apparatus.

First, from the standpoint of the challenges posed by one's suffering - in its socio-historical dimension as well as the level of the imponderable indetermination of any given subject - the speculative relation is responsible for the *porosity of psychoanalysis to its time*: by conditioning the analytic act on its capacity to produce new transmissible determinations for the analytic technique or new problems for the theory, the mechanism of the passe attests to the fact that the global orientation of psychoanalysis is locally conditioned by its "real

teachers", the analytic masses⁴⁴. We could say that the circuit of the passe constantly reinvents psychoanalysis not by adding determinations to the unconscious (as if the unconscious was the product of a given culture), that is, not by teaching psychoanalysis *what to listen to*, but rather *how to listen* - by transforming the scope of what an analyst can do in order to locate the effects of the subject and to produce subjectivization. We could call this the *co-variant* dimension of the passe.

Second, the closure of the circuit of the passe is also *the process in charge of the constant production of a homogeneity between the dimension of the symptom - of the site of intervention - and of the desire of the analyst - the intervening principle*. The logics of traversal, testimony and transmission, as we have seen, condition the consistency of the act on certain practices, introducing different levels of otherness into it (the otherness of the passers, of the jury and of the School) - our hypothesis is that this is precisely the process which qualifies the desire of the analyst, sustained at the impasse of the Other by the School, to be *of the same consistency as the otherness of enjoyment*. In other words, it is not simply the silence, the punctuation or the short session which is responsible for analytic effects: it is the position of the analyst, forced into existence by the institutional circuit which gives body to the hypothesis of the unconscious, which infuses such technical strategies of interpretation with their efficacious dimension. Furthermore, the consequences of an interpretation - not only the effects it produced on the space of the analysand's speech, but also the capacity of the analyst to deal with the anguish and the 'horror' of the analytic act - should also be conceived as a consequence whose weight is not really the analyst's sole responsibility to carry, but rather something distributed across the entire analytic field. The efficacy of interpretation would therefore be conditioned on the institutional practice of the passe, the critical powers of psychoanalysis conditioned on its constructive capacity.

The superposition of our first group-schema, in our preliminary considerations of the clinic, with our diagram of the passe could perhaps reveal an important resonance not only at the level of the two basic principles we have established (covariance and homogeneity), but also at the level of each logic that we have discerned:

.....
44 Althusser 1996

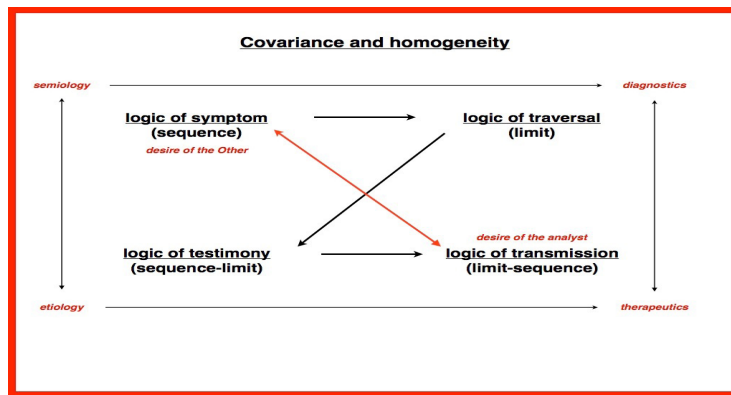


fig.10

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the analytic community appears here as *a community with no inside*⁴⁵. That is, the analysand that undergoes the passe only becomes part of the community of analysts *by contributing to a new definition of what it means to belong to the community* - the analysand is recognized only if she introduces an unrecognizable point into the community that comes to recognize her.

We have now some powerful conceptual tools, derived from a different reading of Lacan, with which to construct a consistent presentation of Žižek's second theory of the political act, one in which *the construction of the political idea conditions the critique of ideology*..

3.6 Additional remark: the joke as a formalism

Before we move back to the problem of the political act, let us briefly turn to a theme that is also very dear to the Žižekian critique of ideology: the joke. Lacan himself had already pointed out that the *passe* is structured like a “witz”⁴⁶. And we can now better grasp why: the circuit of the *passe* does in fact include the point of the *sinthome* (testimony) and of the *matheme* (transmission), but *in its totality* it is the joke which is able to articulate itself in all the logical modalities at stake in this idea. To help us visualize this, I suggest the following comic quartet:

45 On this point, please refer to *Vers un Signifiant Nouveau: Our Task after Lacan* in Hamza 2014.

46 Lacan 1975

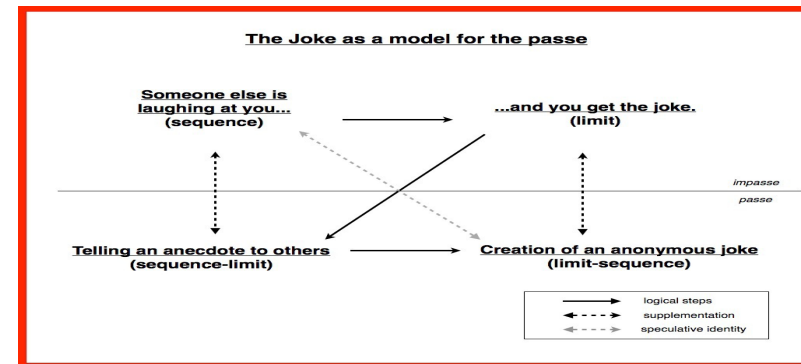


fig.11

At the level of the symptom, it seems like the joke is on me: there is an Other who enjoys at the expense of my suffering, someone else who has access to the consistency which my own identity lacks. At the limit-point of analysis, the unknown frame of the joke (which others could laugh about, but I couldn't) suddenly "falls" into the joke - the joke is still on me, but I get the punchline which, until then, was solely accessible to an unknown enjoying Other. At the point of the laughter, the analysand and the Other have something in common. The logic of the testimony puts this joke, which is woven out of my suffering, to the test of a first transmission, still made effective by the fact that the analysand (the passant) is the one to tell it: the joke takes the form of an anecdote, a fragment from one's life which is able to produce in others the same laughter that it produced first on the supposed Other (symptom) and then on the analysand (traversal). Finally, the logic of transmission separates the joke from the anecdotal character of being told by someone who has personal investment in it: the joke *becomes anonymous* - that is, it becomes a joke proper, one that can be told by anyone to anyone, without losing its power. It is crucial to note, furthermore, that the anonymous joke produced at the end of the process is *homogenous* with the joke at the entry point of the circuit - the joke invented by I-don't-know-who and enjoyed by an unknown other, even though I am trapped in the middle of it.

Comedy is not only “plastic” enough to mold itself into each one of the four logical moments of the *passe*, it is also quite special in its capacity to think the last and most fragile of these moments - the passage where the singular novelty produced by an analytic process

manages to detach itself from the guarantee provided by the body of the analysand:

“what is at stake [in the comic spirit] is not simply the universal value of a statement (of its content), but the universalizability of the place of enunciation itself. In this case, the place of enunciation does not undermine the universality of the statement but becomes its very internal gap, that which alone generates the only (possible) universality of the statement.”⁴⁷

Neither the matheme nor the sinthome allow us to articulate this paradoxical inversion: they both hide the productive dimension of psychoanalysis proper under the auspices of science (the universal transmissibility of the matheme) or of literature (the singular narrative resistance of the sinthome), and neither one of these two approaches manages to think the proper psychoanalytic circuit which binds the subject as *supposed* (symptom, traversal) to the subject as *support* (testimony, transmission), and therefore to highlight the strange (and mostly unexplored) movement through which a form which parasitized someone’s body can come to be a new thought which anybody can engage with. The joke, on the other hand, circulates not only between the critical and the constructive, but also between the subject as encrusted in the body of a speaking being and the idea of a subject supported by the body of the School - a circuit which alone justifies the psychoanalytic claims to universality:

“A new joke acts almost like an event of universal interest: it is passed from one person to another like the news of the latest victory”⁴⁸

4. The political act is the greatest obstacle to its own consequences.

The concept of “parallaxian shift” is perhaps the most complex one in Žižek’s work - to the point of the philosopher himself stating that the relation between dialectical and parallaxian logics might very well be

47 Zupančič 2008: 60

48 Freud 2002

understood as the limit of his philosophical thinking⁴⁹.

In *The Parallax View*, the parallaxian operation is defined as a *bracketing which produces an object*⁵⁰: a cut which separates, within a space, that which is reality and that which frames it, while, through this very process of framing, producing a fundamental impasse to this division - an object that is neither reality nor fantasy, but *real*. However, the crucial point is that the field in which this cut has been introduced could have been “bracketed” in a different way, producing a different totality and a different impasse - while, at the same time, *remaining materially homogeneous with the previous, but ontologically heterogenous bracketing*. In this sense, the concept of parallax requires us to think an operation which ties together *two spaces with no outside* - that is, two spaces which overdetermine the very “space of spaces” in such a way that the other space simply has no ontological dignity from the standpoint of the first, and therefore makes it impossible for the two to be thought together. We are not talking about a “point of real” - in the sense of Derrida’s *difference* or the Lacanian *non-relation*, something like “pure difference” - but rather of the confrontation of two totalities structured by different *forms* of such an irreducible difference.

Perhaps the best example of this impossible space is the one composed of psychoanalysis and politics. In his brilliant text *Freud and the Political*⁵¹, Mladen Dolar suggests precisely such a model: psychoanalysis thinks its own act as always coming *too soon* - that is, as the act of opening the space for the subject to take a step at her own risk - while politics thinks its act as always coming *too late* - the act of naming something which already took place, of intervening within the structure of the mass to extract from it the new consistency of a political organization. The crucial point, once more, is that these two acts *cannot co-exist*: psychoanalytic and political thinking *map the same material point of impasse*, the break with the symbolic order, *through different forms of impasse*: the former, as the (im)possibility of inconsistency, as an object which is both cause and product of the Other’s constant suturing of the the place of the subject, the latter, as the (im)possibility of consistency,

49 Žižek 2010: 58

50 Žižek 2006: 56

51 Dolar 2009

as a political body which is redoubles the place of the Other without relying on the law or on the vicissitudes of identification.

Psychoanalysis and politics cannot be put in relation because they are simultaneously too close, to the point of coinciding in the locus of their acts, and too far away, to the point of rendering each other invisible from the perspective of their respective concepts of totality. The concept of parallax was developed in order to account for this *impossible* shift of perspective between incommensurate totalities - an operation which is impossible in the strict sense, given that, from the standpoint of where we begin from, the space to which we turn next is simply not an ontologically consistent destination.

Consider, for example, the form and content of fantasy in psychoanalysis: it matters little in the analytic practice that the scenes of exclusion or exceptionality which usually abound in the phantasmatic space are quite commonly articulated out of the same “stuff” as the political discourse. The phantasm is the locus of the *private transgression* which sustains the *public observance of the law*, but, even though it is ultimately an obstacle to true political change⁵², the scene of fantasy *does in fact* testify to the vocation of politics to articulate an exceptional life, a life “at the risk of the law”. The problem is that, for the analytic treatment, this fact is simply irrelevant - from the standpoint of the analytic position, politics is a particular “cultural formation”, devoid of its singular status. If an analyst were to recognize the political potential of fantasy - its utopian character, for example - it would simply get in the way of actually accomplishing the act which could open the space for a true political potential. On the other hand, from the standpoint of political thinking, the juridical, social or rebellious tonalities of the Other scene could tell us a lot about the sort of political intervention which would be capable of engaging subjects in a new form of political organization - but this potential shines through in the precise measure that we “bracket” the concern with the form of fantasy, with the role of the Other in the maintenance of the singularity of the subject's enjoyment and so on⁵³. Furthermore, while both psychoanalysis and

.....
52 As Todd McGowan has brilliantly put it, the greatest obstacle to (public) revolutionary activity is to already consider oneself (privately) revolutionary - see chapter 8 in McGowan 2013

53 A great example of such treatment of the phantasm can be found in Santner 1997, where the material of Schreber's delirium is considered from the standpoint of a different “bracketing”, that of the

politics recognize in this exceptional phantasmatic point, at the edge of the symbolic space, their common point of intervention, the former measures the success of its interventions by the dislodging of symbolic identifications towards a self-different non-identity (inconsistency), while the latter does so by the establishment of new forms of identification without identity (new consistency).

For a philosophical project so profoundly conditioned by both of these fields of thought, it would inevitably become necessary to develop a concept capable not only of rendering legible the productive passage from these extra-philosophical procedures into philosophy proper, but of conceiving of the *immanent incommensurability* between them. The problem, however, is that this linkage would most likely have to reflect itself within philosophy in one of two ways: either it requires philosophical thinking to alternate between the conditions at stake (i.e. “reminding” psychoanalysis of its political surplus, and then politics of its analytic effects) or it requires us to maintain that the concept of parallax has no theoretical power, given that the novel legibility it allows for can never be verified or thought within the field it operates (since it relates un-relatable fields which have no ontological “closure” from the standpoint of the other). In order to avoid these two limitations, the parallaxian shift must be able to demonstrate its operative value within *one single field of thought* - which is precisely the merit of many of the great insights of *The Parallax View*. For example, the concept of parallax allows us to simultaneously preserve and traverse the incommensurability between politics and economy within Marxist thinking itself:

“Is not the ultimate Marxian parallax, however, the one between economy and politics— between the “critique of political economy,” with its logic of commodities, and the political struggle, with its logic of antagonism? Both logics are “transcendental,” not merely ontico-empirical; and they are both irreducible to each other. Of course they both point toward each other (class struggle is inscribed into the very heart of economy, yet has to remain absent, nonthematized—recall how the manuscript of *Capital* volume III abruptly ends with it; and class struggle is ultimately “about” economic power relations), but this very mutual implication is twisted so that it prevents any direct contact

theological impasse at the heart of modernity's political project.

(any direct translation of political struggle into a mere mirroring of economic “interests” is doomed to fail, as is any reduction of the sphere of economic production to a secondary “reified” sedimentation of an underlying founding political process).”⁵⁴

The tremendous insight to be gained from this presentation is derived from its capacity to locate the two “transcendental” logics within one sole field, so that the philosophical apprehension of this parallaxian shift is not conditioned by the two deadlocks we have mentioned above. A careful reader of *The Parallax View*, however, will note that the book leaves us in want of an equivalent presentation of psychoanalysis. We lack a complete psychoanalytic thinking of the parallax, one that would provide us with a consistent picture of the analytic act and the analytic procedure thought in their own incommensurabilities - and, in fact, the first obstacle in the way of such presentation is that we usually do not even consider such an incommensurability to take place within psychoanalysis to begin with. Nevertheless, if we are to seriously consider the requirements for a renewed theory of the political act that appear with the “second period” of Žižek’s work, we simply cannot do without a presentation of psychoanalysis which strives to immanently locate therein both of the dimension of the act and the dimension of its “day after”.

What I would like to suggest, in the guise of a conclusion, is that the idea of the *passe*, whose basic components have been sketched above, could help us situate the parallaxian shift within strictly psychoanalytic considerations. The complex schema that we have presented in this text allows us to structure the “critical” and “constructive” dimensions of psychoanalysis precisely as two mutually-excluding movements which map the same point of *impasse* in different and incongruous ways.

Our investigation began with the division of the four “logical moments” of the *passe* into two greater sections⁵⁵: those which revolve around the *impasse* of the Other, and those which pass through it.

.....
54 Žižek 2006: 55

55 We have purposefully avoided exploiting certain direct resonances with Lacan’s own presentation of this division, for example, when he proposes the distinction between “psychoanalysis in intension” and “psychoanalysis in extension” - see Lacan 2001: 246

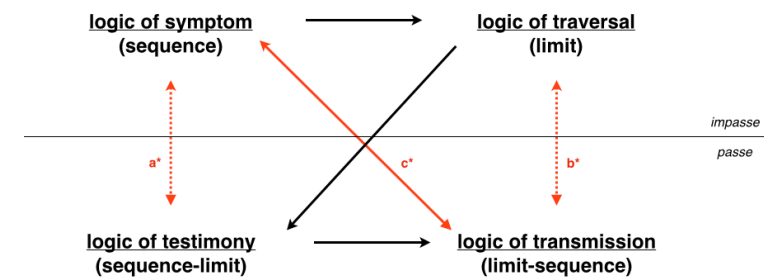


fig.12

On the one hand - the one which is most clearly associated with the everyday practice of analysis - we have the sequential process which is framed by transference, both in its symptomal formations and in its punctuations, and the limit-point of the traversal of fantasy. On the other - the side which depends most clearly on the analytic School - we have the operation which gathers together the previous sequence and its limit-point under a delimited testimony, and the sequential and infinite task of transmitting the novelty presented by this fragile fiction as a challenge to the renewal of analytic thinking. The central question that could be posed at this point - one that we have purposefully avoided until now - is the following: *but where is the analytic act to be situated in this schema?*

A first answer is that the analytic act belongs to the moment of the traversal of fantasy, to the point of being equivalent to it. This solution, which is perfectly adequate to the conceptual framework of the “Millerian” period of Žižek’s work, implies that the analytic act belongs strictly to the clinical framework and that the process of construction which follows from it - the testimony of one’s analytical trajectory and the moment of transmission within the School - is ultimately extrinsic to the phantasmatic scene interrupted by the act. In his seminar on Lacan, from 1994, Alain Badiou proposes an interesting characterization of the anti-philosophical nature of Lacanian psychoanalysis based precisely on this way of locating the act: reduced to a singular mediation between a “knowledge that does not know itself” (symptom, fantasy) and the “mathematic knowledge” (testimony, transmission), the analytic act *does not contribute to thought*⁵⁶. The act remains a purely negative

.....
56 Badiou 2013: 171

vanishing mediator that does not divide psychoanalytic procedure between knowledge and truth, but between two forms of knowledge, with two different relations to truth: at first, there is a repetitive failure of knowledge to know truth, and then, after the act, the very absence of truth in knowledge, marking their disjunction, serves as the proof of the act's efficacy. This is, at its most basic, the ground for the criticism that psychoanalysis (and, consequentially, Žižek) can only think a destructive and essentially negative theory of the act, a rupture whose only possible destiny is to be re-intergrated in the symbolic.

However, considering the resources that were developed through this presentation of the *passe* in psychoanalysis, I believe that have now the means to propose a different solution to the problematic localization of the analytic act.

When we crossed the threshold dividing the first from the second part of the diagram, the driving force and the measure of effectivity behind the two later logical moments was that of *divesting the singularity of the act from its uniqueness* by separating it from the ineffable (through the testimony) and from the unicity of the speaker (through transmission). The concept of parallax becomes central here because it allows us to describe the “constructive practices of the *passe*” as a process of re-actualizing the “critical practices of the *impasses*” from the standpoint of a different *bracketing* of the act.

In short, both the testimony and the transmission of the *passe* treat the analytic act that takes place at the limit-point of analysis as *being itself fantasmatic* - that is, as carrying a surplus which, from the previous standpoint, that of clinical work, was simply invisible. From the perspective of the logic of traversal, there must be a moment of pure withdrawal and rupture with the symbolic order, but from the perspective of the logic of the testimony, which is opened by this act of withdrawal, the necessary “depth” and exceptionality of the act becomes an obstacle to its proper efficacy and the dissolution of this spectre becomes part of the criteria of success of the analytic act itself. In other words, what the circuit of the *passe* requires us to think is a parallaxian shift that intervenes twice, and in a twofold way, at the same point: first, the act locates the intervention at the point of inconsistency in the Other, but from the standpoint opened by this very act, the act comes to stand in for everything that must be worked through and emptied out in

order for psychoanalysis to confront the truly novel kernel produced by the analytic process. To paraphrase the famous text by Laplanche and Pontalis - *Fantasme originaire, fantasmes des origines, origines du fantasme*⁵⁷ - we could say that the parallax shift at the heart of the analytic procedure marks the shift, at the point of the act, from the *traversal of fantasy* to the *fantasies of traversal* - a *collective* fantasy (given that it concerns the current criteria of what the analytic School considers to be the end of analysis) that must be traversed once more, but whose traversal points no longer towards the real of speech, the singularity of the subject, but towards the real of thinking, and the singularity of an idea.

This second solution is one which immanently ties together the theory of the act as traversal and the theory of the “day after” without falling prey to two serious dangers: the first, that of treating the analytic act as something positive or driven by a particular aim, the other, that of improperly importing Badiou's theory of fidelity into analytic considerations. We avoid the former, because we maintain the act as a vanishing mediator, but supplement it with a contradictory clause: that the negative moment of the traversal *be itself negated* and its singularity confronted with a common, affirmative dimension. We avoid the latter, because the Žižekian theory of affirmation, unlike the Badiouian concept of fidelity, is not concerned with forcing an indiscernible mark into the world, but rather with *effacing it* - as we have seen, this is what the operators **a*** and **b*** in our diagram actually articulate⁵⁸. In a certain sense, the first lesson that can be extrapolated from our purely psychoanalytic presentation of the *passe* to a political theory of the act in line with Žižek's later developments is that *the political act is the greatest obstacle to its own consequences*.

Finally, the last operation included in the schema - the arrow **c***, which we have previously called the “speculative relation” - binds together these two opposing or contradictory sides of the act (as traversal of fantasy and as a fantasy of traversal). As we have attempted to show, it is this last “vector” leading from the School back to the clinic which is responsible for the constant reinvention of psychoanalysis, for the necessary actualization of its otherness, so that the clinic

.....
57 Laplanche & Pontalis 1998

58 We propose that this *affirmation as effacement* was already known by Hegel under the name of *reconciliation*.

might also keep itself effective and homogenous to the otherness onto which it seeks to intervene. And, insofar as this speculative return is indispensable to the complete presentation of the analytic procedure, it is also the vector which forces us to conceive of the two un-related spaces of analytic critique and construction as intrinsically connected - two incommensurable totalities touching at the point of a parallaxian act.

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The Singular Invariant. On the dialectic which is not in Alain Badiou

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ABSTRACT:

This essay considers some of the general features of the ongoing critical reception of the philosophy of Alain Badiou. It sets out and describes the divisions within this criticism and concentrates critical attention on one aspect of this reception: the dialectic as it is rendered in the work of Bruno Bosteels. The essay shows that Bosteels' emphasis on the dialectic is at the expense of the formal consistency required by Badiou's conception of the subject: thus mistaking the philosophy.

Keywords:

Badiou, dialectic, relations, formalisation, mathematics, philosophy, subject.

The new groups are not concerned
With what there is to be learned
They got Burton suits ha! you think it's funny
Turning rebellion into money¹

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This essay is divided into two parts. The first provides a context and a position; the second a critical examination of a critical position integral to this context. The context or the conceit is this: What is the situation on the Badiouean philosophical front? That is the 'critical situation' or the situation of Badiou's work today as subject to criticism.² Given the extent of Badiou's oeuvre and the quantity of critical responses it has generated, this requires a series of distinctions or divisions. This first part will render these divisions in their generality. The second part will concentrate on a specific position elemental to one of these divisions: the dialectic. To this end it will concentrate on the writings of Bruno Bosteels, who in terms of the 'critical situation on the Badiouean philosophical front' is emblematic of this position. It will work through his efforts over the last 15 or so years, culminating thus

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¹ The Clash, 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais,' CBS, 1978.

² The focus here is on the English speaking world.

far in his work Badiou and Politics, to interpret ‘against the grain’ the dialectic as the kernel of Badiou’s oeuvre. What fails to not be written there will draw comment.

I
Context/Position

Division 1.

It is clear to this day that Being and Event serves as the foundational text of Badiou’s oeuvre. This has two senses: that used in speaking of mathematical theories such as Set Theory or Category Theory, where the basic definition of foundational is not theological or generative but is that the new theory is capable of re-writing the entirety of (in this case) mathematical discourse in its own terms without loss. It is a recommencement: the desire for which, so to speak, is an immanent effect of the discourse itself such that it has realised its own impasse. Secondly, and more conventionally (and with regard to Badiou’s oeuvre), if 1982’s Theory of the Subject (already the theoretical summary of a suite of theoretical works and interventions), in Badiou’s own estimation, fell, not unlike Hume’s Treatise, ‘still born from the press’, then the publication of Being and Event effectively begins the slow but sure foundation of Badiou’s work as systematic philosophy. And still today, 26 years later, the concepts and categories of Being and Event remain at the centre of most criticism and commentary, just as they remain crucial to Badiou’s work itself.³ By far the vast majority of articles, edited collections, books and interviews focus on Being and Event (and its consequent smaller texts) as either their object of analysis or point of orientation. With few notable exceptions, this is still the case in 2014, eight years after Logiques des mondes: L’être et l’événement, 2, and five after Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2.⁴

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3 In a recent lecture at the European Graduate School (09/2012) for example Badiou articulated an un-Hegelian conception of the dialectic – an affirmative dialectic – by making use not of the categories and concepts of Logics of Worlds or Theory of the Subject but of Being and Event.

4 A recent collection of essays headlined by the editors as ‘the first critical engagement with Badiou’s work since Logics of Worlds’ contains only one essay out of thirteen directly engaged with this work and then only with giving a re-description of the mathematics that underpins it. Two others make passing reference; most say nothing about it at all. Only James Williams and the contribution by Bartlett and Clemens devote any space to the philosophical aspects of Logics of Worlds. Indeed, the main thrust of the collection seems to be a defence of Gilles Deleuze. But that’s another story. See Badiou and Philosophy, 2012. I would also note that Justin Clemens published in 2006, prior to the appearance of the English translation, a 40 page critical explication of Logic of Worlds, ‘Had We But Worlds Enough, and Time, This Absolute, Philosopher...’. And

What understanding Being and Event as a foundational text brings into relief is that Theory of the Subject, in many ways an incredible work, both a formidable delimitation and an astounding synthesis, marks an impasse – political, artistic, ontological and formal. But an impasse is not an end; it is the articulated point, immanent to a process (a thought process) at which one must recommence intellectual struggle – should one acquire the resources! What is required by an impasse, as the Platonic dialogues never cease to demonstrate, as the history of philosophy verifies, is a new or renewed orientation to the question raised to the level of impasse.⁵ Philosophy comes to pass only on the basis of this (re)newed orientation to the point of impasse, which is to say, on the basis of a new decision in and for thought. To think again: to decide so as to take up, to take up so as to affirm, the decision for thought. For Badiou, as for Plato, for philosophers and philosophy more generally, this decision for a new orientation to the question is provided by the inventions and discoveries in thought that are not themselves philosophical but that have consequences for philosophy, the discourse condemned to recommence, eternally, to draw the consequences and to be addressed to all. This thought of the outside, so to speak, which will have been immanent to any possible philosophical recommencement cannot be, then, subject to some overarching or a priori concept of what it must be or how it must appear – historical, logical, biological, relational or dialectical.⁶ The absolute non-relation between impasse (exhaustion) and recommencement (generic) is what an event comes to mark.

In Being and Event most of the elements presented in Theory of the Subject – Mallarmé and Lacan, Hegel and Marx, mathematics and poetry, structure and place, formalism and dialectic, truth and knowledge and so on – remain present, but Being and Event orients itself to a decision which irretrievably refounds every element in turn: simply, the ‘philosophical decision’ that ‘mathematics is ontology’. Such a decision is already conditioned by what a mathematics ‘indiscerns’

of course we need to acknowledge how much work has been devoted to Badiou’s entire oeuvre in Latin America.

5 In Plato it can be as simple as a new day, a new set of interlocutors or an interruption. Cf. the first lines of the Timaeus.

6 Cf. ‘That the act and the effect of the infinite should be a question of gaps [écarts] and of written supplements, is indeed what no-one wanted to hear, as Cantor’s experience showed two centuries after the founders of the new calculus’ Badiou 2102, p. 207.

of being – that it is (not)One and or (not)ineffable. Concerned with being (philosophically speaking), mathematics is the science of being, the discourse of ontology, now and ‘historically’ – that is, within philosophy’s history. Thus it is mathematics qua situation – as a discrete discourse concerned with what is for all and that is in itself eventually re-founded – which makes a renewed orientation to the elements that concern philosophy, newly possible. The Cantor event, which conditions Badiou’s decision, pronounces the denumerability of the infinite against totality (the whole, the Absolute, the one-All) and disrupts the mereological impasse of the one and the many, of transcendence, expressivism, essentialism and relativism alike.

The (philosophical) statement that mathematics is ontology – the science of being qua being – is the trace of light which illuminates the speculative scene, the scene which I had restricted, in my *Thorie du sujet*, by presupposing purely and simply that there ‘was some’ subjectivization. The compatibility of this thesis with ontology preoccupied me, because the force – and absolute weakness – of the ‘old Marxism’, of dialectical materialism, had lain in its postulation of just such a compatibility in the shape of the generality of the laws of the dialectic, which is to say the isomorphy between the dialectic of nature and the dialectic of history. This (Hegelian) isomorphy was, of course, still-born.⁷

In this single point, so to speak, Being and Event is marked as absolutely distinct or ‘separate’ from the orientation of Theory of the Subject that, while irreducibly committed to the axiom ‘one divides into two’ remained, one way or another, shackled to the One of history and to a dialectical unfolding – however radicalized it appeared there.⁸

From the other side of the impasse, an other side which is precisely opened up by this decision (and, theoretically speaking, by decision as such) Theory of the Subject cannot, not now anyway, stand alone within the oeuvre either as the ‘forgotten’ arche of the entire oeuvre or as singly outside it. Being and Event includes and entirely recalibrates the

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7 Badiou 2005, p. 4.

8 Cf. ‘My antihistoricism pertains uniquely to the impossibility of integrating things into an overall history, declaring that sequences of worlds, the disparate of worlds, can be reconciled with or organised in a general dynamic’. Badiou and Sedofsky 2006, p. 250.

elements presented in Theory of the Subject with respect to its decisive orientation – that the One is not; that being is pure multiplicity; that ontology, the science of being qua being

is mathematics and that the inherent yet entirely internally consistent limits of ontology (its inconsistency) prescribe the event of that which is not being qua being. As Paul Livingston describes it this is a decision for ‘consistency and incompleteness against completeness and inconsistency’.⁹ In other words: for the generic infinite against constructivist finitude. As Oliver Feltham remarks, ‘philosophy is opened up to contingent transformation and reworking’.¹⁰

Consequently, Being and Event enacts a recommencement on ‘the philosophical front’, one that refuses to renege on prior political, artistic, mathematical or amorous commitments, and which refuses also to give up on the inherent philosophical conviction to think the thought of these not-philosophical procedures, these conditions (art, love, science and politics), as the thought of its time and to do so under the key categories that subtend any re-configuration of the philosophical front; being, truth and subject. As a foundational work we can say that Being and Event re-describes and re-configures what preceded it in Theory of the Subject, in terms that include that work without loss.¹¹ Or in generic terms, Being and Event is ‘richer in sense’.

The publication of *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2*, appears to complicate these claims. Badiou’s comment that *Logics of Worlds* (on some measures) is closer to Theory of the Subject than to Being and Event certainly seems to verify this complication especially if we consider that *Logics of Worlds* is billed as a sequel to Being and Event on the one hand, but that on the other its operating ontology (the mathematics of what it is for being to appear (onto-logy), Category Theory, has the capacity to re-write Set Theory in its own terms, to give a new and relative foundation to mathematical ‘objects’.¹²

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9 Livingston 2011, p. 53.

10 Feltham 2005, p. xxii.

11 Cf. Badiou 2008, p. 54: ‘This use of the word ‘model’, to my mind, delivers a fertile epistemological category. I propose to call model the ordinance [statut] that, in the historical process of a science, retrospectively assigns to the science’s previous practical instances their experimental transformation by a definite formal apparatus.’

12 In an interview, Badiou also points out that the earlier text, *The Concept of Model*, in some

If *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2 is a sequel,¹³ or one of the consequences of *Being and Event*, of the enquiries it opened into the philosophical situation (and the consequent impasses to which it gives rise), then it has to pertain in its key concepts and categories to the original, or in other words, remain fundamentally articulated to the original trajectory, and this it does; as we will see, the criticisms of Badiou, paradoxically, bear this out.

Quentin Meillessoux neatly summarises the sequence in this way: Badiou

add[s] to the mathematics of being [being multiple] a logic of appearance capable of accounting for the diverse consistencies revealed to us in our experience. It is therefore necessary to mobilise a logic capable of ‘capturing’ the innumerable modes of appearance possible for being and to provide some sort of connection, however slight, to visible things.¹⁴

Whereas, then, *Being and Event* includes *Theory of the Subject* without loss, even as it is an absolutely distinct work – and so a foundational work in the ‘ontological’ sense – *Logics of Worlds* is, in essence, not *Being and Event* turned inside out nor re-presented, but the construction of the ‘worldly’ consequences of the latter’s own ‘intrinsic’ and, as such, utterly consistent impasse but (unlike that between *Theory of the Subject* and *Being and Event*) without any alteration in its formal orientation. This is to say, the impasses arrived at in *Being and Event*, impasses necessary to the trajectory Badiou undertakes – specifically the difficulties of thinking situation as a space of appearing and site in terms of its situational being there, thus ‘beyond formalisation’ as it were – are treated in *Logics of Worlds* by ‘means of formalisation’. What is treated by way of an intrinsic and subtractive ontology in *Being and Event* is treated anew by an extrinsic, relational and ‘objective’ ontology in *Logics of Worlds*. The pathos of the ‘subject’ has no bearing on the relations which condition its possibility.

senses anticipates *Logics of Worlds*. But, and this is the rub, we can only know that from this side of the impasse! Badiou 2008, p. 96. Note also that the ‘existence’ of such objects is not established by Category Theory (CT) or by logic more generally. Mathematics remains the discourse on being as such – hence CT is a ‘mathematised logic’ and not the logicisation of mathematics. For a contrary view, and for the arguments that such a view is possible, see the work of both Z. L Fraser and Paul Livingston.

13 Cf. Clemens 2006 for discussion of the very possibility of a philosophical sequel.

14 Q. Meillassoux 2011, p. 1–11.

In Badiouean terms, despite the appearance of a return to the typological concerns of *Theory of the Subject* – which is less a return than the ongoing pursuit of that single Idea, ‘real change’ – what the thoroughly relational ontological rearticulation ensures is the formalisation of that minimal difference (which makes all the difference) inherent to any being-multiple; that it appear-there. To put this another way, *Being and Event* is the point at which the algebra of *Theory of the Subject* and the topology of *Logics of Worlds* are rendered both indiscernible and absolutely distinct. *Being and Event* remains the decisive intervention into the apparent continuity, or linearity of the world of Badiou’s appearance and thus divides and solders the oeuvre internally.¹⁵ The point of this banal topology is not to render *Theory of the Subject* and what it ‘synthesises’ inexplicable, passé or inexistent but to set the parameters by which certain key criticisms of Badiou might be responded to via engagement with these three texts, which, precisely by appearing as variously sequential, force to the surface the impossibility of their seamless articulation.

Division 2.

The second division regards criticism itself. With the length and breadth of such an oeuvre it is impossible to account for all criticisms. The difficulty is in avoiding arbitrariness. If we divided criticisms between the many ‘one-off’ criticisms – a single review, a single response to a single conception (the event; the politics, the inaesthetics, etc), the crepuscular, overwrought or hysterical dismissals – and those readers of Badiou who have ‘gone on with it’ in some way – that is, continuing to engage critically with the concepts and categories, or to take up these and deploy them across the ‘entire system of reference’ and in so doing elaborating various critiques of the system ‘from within’ – we run the risk of missing what might be crucial. It’s entirely possible that a single intervention might penetrate to the core of the system more powerfully and with greater consequence – such as Russell’s letter to Frege – than years of sustained engagement: affirmative or negative.

15 Cf. ‘Note that while the infinity-support is required by the recurrent possibility of inscribing a mark in the empty place assigned by the primitive relation of the domain, conversely it is the impossibility of a certain mark within that domain that gives rise to the infinity point. While the former supports the rules of construction, the latter, which is inaccessible, recasts and relaunches them, thereby determining a new space of inscription, a difference in the support: the infinity-point is the differential of the infinity-support’. Badiou 2012, p.189.

Logics of Worlds is partly a response to such ‘singular’ interventions; namely those, no doubt in various ways, of Desanti, Deleuze, Nancy and Lyotard.¹⁶ We can leave to one side this ‘strong’ type of ‘one-off’ criticisms whose singularity registers as what is brought to bear, consistently, in their work over time. It is clear that such criticisms have been in some way taken up by Badiou, incorporated as it were, one way or another.¹⁷

Our way of distinguishing between the other ‘one-offs’ and the ‘ongoing’ is conditioned by a concern for the oeuvre as we have described it. In general, these ‘one-offs’ come in two guises: As noted, they deal only with single aspects of the oeuvre and often with regard to the particular concerns of the critic’s field or specialty etc. or, sometimes, with their possible deployment; or they are review articles dealing only once and in passing with the concepts and categories of the ‘big books’. Certainly the former includes essays, chapters and books. However, we suggest that these ‘one-offs’, taken together, display certain general tendencies which are both reflected in and are reflections of what we are calling the ‘ongoing’ engagements, those constrained by being ongoing to address the oeuvre not only as it develops but in its development – so in Badiou’s case from 1966 to the present – or of what is of fundamental import within it. The claim is that the ongoing critiques include within them the general tendencies of the one-offs, and so it is the former that concern us.

Division three.

This division is more theoretical and internal. Badiou asserts that he seeks to combine ‘the most uncompromising formalism and the most radical subjectivism’¹⁸ without recourse to dogmatic synthesis or succumbing to the sublime temptations of one over the other: which is to say, without returning to some version of the One. What holds

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16 Badiou, 2009, p. 361. Slavoj Žižek is probably the misfit of this notion. He at once takes his distance from Badiou, usually where the ontological rupture that Badiou brings to bear crosses paths with his Lacanian-Hegelian disjunctive synthesis, and he takes his cue from this very same rupture, usually when the repetitive drive of Lacanian-Hegelian synthesis requires supplementation. What Badiou takes from him is unclear.

17 There is another form of engagement which one often notes as taking place between ‘equals’. Figures like Badiou, Agamben, Rancière, Deleuze, Groys, Sloterdijk, Negri (the list could go on) often speak at each other without (explicit) citation...and then there are enemies, usually named.

18 Badiou & Bosteels 2005, p. 243.

this formalism and subjectivism together (as two) is the conditioned and conditional, supplemental theory of truth. Thus we have again the philosophical ‘world’: being, subject, truth. It is along these lines that the third division unfolds, immanent to the ongoing critiques.

In short, there are critics who privilege the formalism and critics who privilege the subjectivism or who want to effect in some way the subordination of one to the other – consciously or consequently. But this is not quite accurate, for it is more often the case that those who privilege the subjectivism actually privilege one of the conditions, namely politics, reducing the other conditions to analogies or afterthoughts worthy only of mention. The privileging of the mathematics or rather ontology (which is not always what Badiou means by ontology) or its extension into the physical sciences, often realises similar reductions of the philosophical conditions of art and love, which, for Badiou are thought practices or truth procedures in their own right and without which philosophy is impossible.

The result of either privilege, mathematics or politics, is almost invariably either the occlusion of one by the other or the subsumption of one as the other: both resulting in the loss of the ‘truly new’. That is, the political condition (most often) becomes sutured to the ontology (for some as an indifference; for others as the end of politics) or the mathematical condition becomes merely an adjunct or even a ‘tactic’ of the politics.¹⁹ In both cases there is a tendency to either push one side of the ‘two’ beyond what the necessity of the composition allows for, or, and consequently, the tendency to conflate (or demand the conflation of) discrete analyses such as, for example, ontological situations with empirical worlds.²⁰ These ‘tendencies’, which, in certain cases, display a fetish for a realism – empirical or conceptual – that appears without justification, then become grounds for criticism. Most decidedly – and indeed, this is a problem within philosophy itself, stemming from a

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19 Hence the section heading in Bosteels’ Badiou and Politics, ‘Whither Mathematics’. See below.

20 cf. how Peter Hallward sets out his questions in his ‘Translators Introduction’ to Think Again. In the very first one he addresses himself to the ontology and then immediately conflates the ontological with the political – turning elements into ‘someones’, the nothing into the proletariat (and the subject into the individual). We are well aware of how Badiou likes to use the Internationale to illustrate the move from elementary inexistence to the orientation of a new configuration of a world (from nothing to everything) but his demonstration of the distinction between what situation is and situations stands behind this polemic. Without this it is oratory and not polemic.

misrepresentation of Plato that is still current in his reception²¹ – it is between mathematics and politics that this internecine struggle for dominance in philosophy is waged. Love and art, as noted, are mostly forgotten as is the reconfiguration of philosophy, ‘for philosophy’, that is central to Badiou’s project. Philosophy is not the repository of wisdom, but the discipline of its pursuit, an act; thus Badiou needs to also be read in terms of the procedure being undergone, the trajectory thus established, as much as for the results effected. The effect of ‘privilege’ is that the proper conditional relation of the conditions to philosophy loses all its theoretical force and, importantly, the transitory form of being, subject and truth – that every situation has being, is founded in truth and convokes its subject – is similarly lost. The usual ‘domestication by commentary’ is the result: something Badiou has worked hard to avoid.

This division yields the general critical trajectory and forms a known part of it. We are not saying that these are the most salient criticisms of Badiou:²² simply, that for whatever reason they have prevailed and been repeated and entered into the received wisdom concerning Badiou, such as it exists.²³ It’s not the case either that they are equally distributed; those with the ‘will to formalisation’ let’s say, are far outnumbered by those with the ‘will to subjectivisation’. For the ‘subjectivists’, the key refrains are ‘relations’ and ‘dialectic’. The emphasis on these requires an interpretation (or reduction) of the formalisation that privileges, as its consequence, representation,

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21 For Plato it was the poem that was to be interrupted for it provided politics with its discursive form. Plato’s recourse to mathematics – the discourse that could not be reduced to opinion – provided philosophy with the means to a thoroughgoing subtraction from this sophistic ethos.

22 Cf. for example Jon Roffe’s 2012 sustained, textually rigorous and trenchant work defending Deleuze proper from Badiou’s ‘reforms’.

23 Let’s not forget that despite what appears to be a ‘bourgeoning’ market in Badiou and Badiou related publications he remains, as do many others, of marginal interests at best to so called philosophy schools around the globe. His resonance is felt more in the disparate conditions, and as such conditionally. This is not a matter of the continental-analytic divide at all – itself the product of institutional commodification, the vanity of social status, class protectionism and intellectual vacuity, and should cease to be given any further philosophical currency. Rather there is ‘what is’, and there is ‘what is not’, philosophy – since Plato! Indeed the entirety of Platonic corpus concerns this immanent separation of what philosophy is, a separation in act, from its ‘sophistic double’. In the Sophist, analogous to the in-separation in the Republic of the just state from the slew of existing forms of the state, the nascent philosopher is seen to be what is left over when the seven variations of sophistry have been purged of the basis of their claims to, not knowledge per se, but what Badiou calls in his essay ‘On Subtraction’, ‘knowledge in truth’ (Badiou 2004, pp. 103-118.)

mediation, negation and ‘reality’ over what is often referred to as ‘abstraction’.²⁴ The latter, it’s asserted – quite forgetting that what is at stake is philosophy – is, in Badiou’s work, the real stumbling-block to subjective ‘action’ in the real world.²⁵ This tendency, whether dialectical or relational in name, supposes some form of ‘co-belonging’ always already there between ‘concept and experience or, between the logical (or ontological) and the historical (or phenomenological).’²⁶ Such assertions seem to ‘forget’ that such a ‘relation’ is precisely that which is forced – one way or another from (the) nothing (that is).

Indeed, ‘forcing’ is one of the key conceptual links between Being and Event and Logics of Worlds and a key distinction between these both and Theory of the Subject. But subject to the ‘subjectivists’ reading, the formal work, paradoxically, becomes the epiphenomenon of the real of experience and history: as if Badiou has written a mathematical ideology. This is contrary to Badiou’s non-negative description of the ‘materialist dialectic’ of Logics of Worlds as ‘ideological’ insofar as both materialism and the dialectic – the mark

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24 The question of ‘how’ this word is meant to function is interesting, given Badiou would hardly shrink from it (cf. Badiou 2003, p. 124: ‘Abstraction is the foundation of all thought’) and even Deleuze affirmed it as foundational for thought. We can also note that Badiou directly opposes his notion of subtraction to abstraction with regard to thinking situations formally. This question of abstraction is one of the things that unite Hallward and Bosteels. While, obviously, Badiou and Hegel do not accord abstraction the same status in all contexts (Hegel is, lamentably, and in direct opposition to Badiou, a fairly conventional critic of the limits of mathematics qua ‘abstraction’), Hegel is also someone who continually uses the word ‘abstract’ to name what, in other contexts, could be called the ‘refusal of abstraction’. Put differently, he again and again denounces appeals to ‘immediacy’ (the ‘real, concrete world as given to experience’) or ‘the ineffable quiddity of this singular moment’ As abstract, while, in contrast, referring to incredibly involved conceptual gymnastics as ‘concrete’. In other words, Hegel never opposes (his occasionally naive remarks about mathematics notwithstanding) “abstract thought” to “concrete reality.” On the contrary, he continually denies the concretion of the immediate, while affirming the concretion of conceptual development. Cf. Badiou’s endorsement of Deasanti’s critique of Hegel as the ‘embodiment of the bad relationship between philosophy and science’ in Badiou 2009, p. 529. Hegel’s ‘incorporation (of the sciences) to the concept’ is a charge Badiou repeats elsewhere.

25 In a review of Quentin Meillassoux’s After Finitude, Peter Hallward, in very similar vein to his treatment of Badiou vis. both BE and LW (see his ‘Order and Event 2008, pp. 97-123), again effectively conflates ontological analysis with an assertion of empirical primacy, all but dismissing Meillassoux’s project because it can’t determine revolutionary politics. See Hallward 2008a, pp. 51-56. See also Nathan Brown’s unpublished response available @ <http://speculativeheresy.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/on-after-finitude-a-response-to-peter-hallward/> It’s instructive to read Hallward’s critiques of Badiou, Meillassoux and Deleuze (see Hallward 2006.) side by side. All fail, Hallward argues, with regard to ‘real’ relations. Hallward essentially claims they do not have such a concept rather than that their concepts of relations are not it. Just what is what these are not is (not yet) forthcoming.

26 Bosteels 2011, p. 42.

of the decision against 'democratic (or historical) materialism' – presuppose that being and appearance are neither.²⁷ In other words, what mathematics tells us about being and appearance is not reducible to dialectical reason or a co-relational and thus (a problematically) a priori theory of relations.

On the side of formalisation there is at the limit the effort either to extend the mathematical intervention into the physical or biological sciences, to either test its veracity against these or indeed to invert the ontological (the philosophical decision qua ontology that is) into a sort of bio-ontological primacy, in which philosophy would be the means to its own subjection to 'hard science'.²⁸ There is also the effort to return this formalisation to that which it subtracted itself from most emphatically – language or coincidentally, logic: and, concomitantly, efforts to locate the subject (such as it might be) as an effect of ontology itself and thus flattening the philosophical decision for Set (and Category) Theory to the level, ultimately, of 'taste' – that which is left when formalisation is itself pushed beyond what it must do. These latter formalist efforts seek in one sense to relativise the ontologically immanent division Badiou has insisted upon between mathematical invention and its literal and formal inscription and the logical expression or formal re-presentation of the former, thus re-aligning the ontological project of intuitionism with that of Badiou's deployment of Paul Cohen's 'generic' orientation. Or, in another sense, actually seeking to both go beyond Badiou's philosophical formalisation of this division and on its very basis invalidate it in favour of logic itself qua ontology. Considerations of the consequences of this tendency, in terms of the critical situation under review, are for another essay.

What is sidelined by both exclusions, sometimes determinately, is the philosophical system: taking that word philosophy in the full sense Badiou gives to it with his claim to 'return philosophy to itself' and to address the conditions 'for philosophy'. It is the case that the very performance of these critiques, even if they seek to be positive or purposive with regard to Badiou's project, actively undermine

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²⁷ Badiou 2006, p. 253.

²⁸ Similar to those new supermarket self-serve checkouts that require the former checkout operators – those displaced by the new machines – to instruct the public in their use. Thus they are forced to do the work of doing themselves out of a job.

its radicality and denude its reach and import. The result is either a suture to an ineluctable scientific or logicist paradigm, no matter how that paradigm is itself radicalized, or the return covertly or overtly, consciously or unconsciously to the dominance of representation, of mediation, of experience or affect, of history, of the political²⁹ or of the culture-sex-technology-management complex Badiou diagnoses in his Saint Paul, and which he re-nominates in Logics of Wolds, 'democratic materialism' – the real of historical materialism. These are the consequences and tellingly, as avatars of the One, they preclude the possibility of truth and prescribe ultimately a subjective incapacity.

Division four.

To note that the modalities of critique, its general tendency, reduce to three key terms is also to elicit several proper names. At the same time, these proper names do not function (or not only) as personal names. If the question of relations (mediation, the primacy of identity) is indeed a question exemplary of a general tendency then to assign to it the proper name Peter Hallward is to mark both its most 'on-going' avatar and the generality it composes. The same goes for Bruno Bosteels and the dialectic, and for Ray Brassier, Zachary Luke Fraser, and Paul Livingstone for various critical 'uncompromising formalisation' ('abstraction').³⁰ Obviously, these names are not exhaustive of these critical procedures nor necessarily do they totalise what is at stake in these tendencies but are, as noted, exemplary, serious and insistent. Although all have written book length studies either on Badiou specifically or studies engaging significantly with Badiou we cannot here extend our explication across all figures and all points.

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²⁹ See Badiou 2005a, pp. 10-25, for the distinction between 'politics' and 'the political'.

³⁰ Oliver Feltham, whose PhD thesis *As Fire Burns* deserves recognition for its early foray into the exposition of Badiou's set-theoretical ontology and for drawing consequences from it, deserves mention here. His *Alain Badiou: Live Theory* carries this expositional work further and stakes a claim for Badiou's 'subject' but he comes down on neither side of this division. We could also mention Frank Ruda's work, specifically the excellent *Hegel's Rabble. An Investigation into Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 2011 & the work of such excellent readers of Badiou as Alberto Toscano, Nina Power, Ed Pluth and Domenick Hoens among several others. The point, as noted, is not lists but general tendencies that have characterised the 'situation' and must be marked for intervention. Some of the work of intervention is carried out in the work of those just named. Quentin Meillassoux's work (*After Finitude*) extends the rupture Badiou's work provides, opening a new series of enquiries provoking their own reactions. As with that of Ray Brassier (*Nihil Unbound*), it is a work of thought and in that sense philosophically lovable. There are of course recent attempts to situate Badiou theologically. A generalised account of this wider situation on the Badiouean critical front is forthcoming in Bartlett & Clemens, *What is Impossible: Badiou and Contemporary Philosophy*, (Routledge).

The remainder of this essay, then, tests the claims of one of these friendly critics, Bruno Bosteels, who speaks here for the dialectic as the central and overarching concern of Badiou. Our aim is to render discernible the 'rational kernel' of his critical concern: his questions, objections, resistances and even more importantly, perhaps, his affirmations. To do so turns ultimately on the distance he takes, and asserts, must be taken from mathematics.

II

Now, in every matter it is of great moment to start at the right point in accordance with the subject.³¹ (T. 29b)

What is it then to read philosophy, and must we only read it. Certainly the prescribed order sustained by the fundamentals does not coincide with the order of its writing.³²

Relations

In many ways the 'dialectical' critical complex that Bosteels elaborates matches and mirrors that named by Hallward in his insistence on 'relations'. Or at least, what minor disagreements they have stem from having a similar problem. Indeed, Hallward speaks often in terms of the transitivity of the two. In his introduction to *Think Again*, Hallward laments the anti-relational and anti-dialectical bias of Being and Event and its concomitant abstraction, he contends, of any possible subject from any possible political (or, we suppose, amorous, artistic or mathematical) act.³³ And indeed, in Badiou's classical or Boolean world every couple – event/site, situation/state, subject/object, void / excess, ontology/phenomenology – Hallward contends, is 'frozen stiff' by his steadfast refusal to deliver us 'a thoroughly relational ontology'.³⁴ One that will, referring here to *Logics of Worlds*, 'require us to privilege history rather than logic as the most fundamental dimension of a world,

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³¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 29b.

³² Derrida 1979, pp. 3-41.

³³ See also Hallward 2004, p. 276. Hallward's criticisms of BE and LW are essentially isomorphic. Cf. Hallward's introduction to *Think Again* (2004, pp.1-20), 'Consequences of Abstraction' with 'Order and Event: On Badiou's Logic of Worlds,' (2008, pp. 97-123).

³⁴ Hallward 2008, p. 121.

and to defend a theory of the subject equipped not only with truth and body but also with determination and political will.³⁵ Further, 'to take seriously the fact that in some cases—with respect to some 'points' of a world—there can be more than one way of saying yes (emphasis added).³⁶ The negative intensity of Hallward's negation is, with all seriousness, directed toward saving the (dialectical) 'materiality' of Badiou's project given, he says – suggesting some ambivalence in his understanding of what mathematics qua discourse of marks and letters is for Badiou³⁷ – that it is now even 'harder to see how this account could be characterised as either materialist or dialectical, other than in relation to the still more immaterialist and exceptionalist orientation of the first volume'.³⁸ This suggests that Hallward seems to retain a romantic understanding of mathematics, one informed by the received wisdom of Platonic idealism, and this coupled with a quaintly organic understanding of materialism and its (un)willing subject.³⁹ Moreover, the implicit correlation of appearing with a political manifestation repeats the Aristotelian conceit and so registers anew and against the grain the relational exclusivity on which it is predicated. Not all men who have language are political animals.

In his introduction to his *Badiou and Politics*, Bruno Bosteels notes that he disagrees with his friend Peter Hallward's ascription of a Kantian style dualism at the heart of Badiou's immanent divisions between truth and knowledge or subject and object, on one significant point. Whereas for Hallward there is no theory of relations in Badiou's

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³⁵ Hallward 2008, p. 121. Badiou's recent analysis of the riot might suggest he has listened to Hallward on this but a closer look demonstrates that what Badiou is enumerating in *The Return of History* is history in a subjective, thus evental, sense. The analysis is here correlated to his logics of change as set out in LW. There is no History in the sense of it being determinative or subsisting ground etc.: it is precisely what any fully subjective change brings onto the scene – in other words, the truth of the old regime!

³⁶ Hallward 2008, p. 122. Would no be a way of saying yes? At what point would the two be indistinct? Would it just be a matter of opinion?

³⁷ See for a critical consideration of this Justin Clemens 2003, pp. 73-102.

³⁸ Hallward 2008, p. 123.

³⁹ This licences the critiques of others. Daniel Bensaïd, in a minor article, uses Hallward's interpretation to offer: '... in this philosophy of politics an 'absolutist logic' that leaves little space for multiple subjectivities, shuns the democratic experience, and condemns the sophist to a sort of exile. Badiou's quasi-absolutist orientation preserves the ghost of a subject without object. This is a return to a philosophy of majestic sovereignty, whose decision seems to be founded upon a nothing that commands the whole' (TA 106).

work, for Bosteels – despite Badiou, he says, seeming to offer himself up in various ways to these criticisms – the articulation of being and event ‘on the same plane’ is the real dialectical and relational core of Badiou’s project.⁴⁰ It’s not so much then that relations remain stubbornly and fatally absent; it’s that the truth of the dialectical relation has been ‘obscured’ by the formalisation (and subsequently by the ‘die-hard maths fans’ among Badiou interpreters),⁴¹ and or by over-emphasis on ‘one or more’ of the conditions and thus the sets of references they call upon.⁴² Thus the dialectic ‘in direct lineage from Hegel’ is truly the singular invariant of Badiou’s philosophy. Bosteels is not unaware of Badiou’s efforts to differentiate his ‘dialectic’ from this lineage but Bosteels is determined that even this – the obscurities of set and category theory included – is merely one of the valences of the dialectic itself. It is finally a matter of everyone else reading Badiou correctly: ‘this means that we reread this book’s [BE] central thesis [the generic theory of the subject] from the point of view of ... Theory of the Subject’.⁴³

This strategy, combined with the authority invested in Hegel as (one of) the crucial philosopher(s),⁴⁴ the one who ‘sublates mathematics to the concept’, invites the claim from Bosteels that ‘set theory’, being in one sense the theory of ‘quantitative’ impasse, ‘confirms one of [the] principal laws’ of the dialectic insofar as it guarantees (unconsciously for Badiou) the necessity of ‘leaps’, ‘breaks’ etc. ‘in the gradualness of nature’ and so that ‘all of a sudden’ emerges the identity of opposites.⁴⁵ Let’s note three things as preface: first, the inversion played out here on the terrain of a correct interpretation. Thus, it is the case that set theory ontology (as the science of being qua being) thinks its own situational inconsistency and that an event will expose this inconsistency qua any

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40 Bosteels 2011, pp. 3-4. Žižek is also credited here with this accusation in more ‘radical’ form.

41 Bosteels 2011, p. 35 (emphasis added).

42 This is yet another sleight against mathematics of which there are quite a few in this book.

43 Bosteels 2002, p. 198. ‘Theory of the Subject’, Bosteels contends (2009, p. viii) ‘is a work whose legendary difficulty until recently turned away many more readers than it attracted lasting admirers, even from among Badiou’s most ardent followers’. Who?

44 Badiou 2009 p. 527. Plato and Descartes being the other two. The privilege of Hegel by Bosteels is not only related to Hegel’s sublation of mathematics to the concept – contra the other two – but has a personal context. See Preface to Bosteels 2011.

45 Bosteels 2011, p. 164. Badiou traces the becoming of this identity of opposites (as Bestimmung) in Hegel in the early pages of Theory of the Subject. See pp. 8-9.

situation – given ontology thinks the being of any situation. But far from confirming a law of the dialectic – which even in Theory of the Subject is the ‘law of being’⁴⁶ (and not qua being) it formalises what the latter could not think but ‘pointed to’ – the nothing that is; hence the dialectic’s reliance on some notion of the absolute or end to structure its (circular) movement. Second, this presumption leads into the confusion of ‘the identity of opposites’ with generic indiscernibility. This is symptomatic of the analogic reading strategy, which in turn accuses its ‘other’ (‘die hard math’s fans’ i.e.) of the very same thing. Verisimilitude is not an ontological category. Thirdly, the implication of the necessary relation between what mathematics qua situation realizes as itself, so to speak – inconsistency at its heart – and event is a category mistake. The former does not prescribe the occurrence of the latter given that what is formally demonstrated is the void-relation between them. Events are ‘of situations’, not mathematical formalisms. It is ironic that Bosteels’ argument plays out this way, as we will see.

Texts and Questions

The key texts for Bosteels’ elaboration of this reading strategy are the two-part ‘The Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism’ (2001-2), ‘On the Subject of the Dialectic’ (2004), and his recent Badiou and Politics (2011).⁴⁷ Various repetitions of this same position are also found in the long translator’s introductions to Theory of the Subject and The Adventure of French Philosophy and most of his published work on Badiou.⁴⁸ We will concentrate primarily on the recent (2011) book as this

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46 Badiou, 2009a, p. 3.

47 This work contains 12 entries on Plato. While it is true that index entries alone cannot tell us everything, it is the case that there is no sustained discussion of Badiou’s Platonism or Plato’s Badioueanism; strange for a work on the dialectical politics of a Platonist.

48 In his translator’s introduction to Theory of the Subject, Bosteels tells us of his early engagement with Badiou’s texts, the order of his reading and the emphasis he put on them. It is clearly a political orientation and TS remains something of a privileged text for him. He repeats this in his preface to Badiou and Politics. The following should be read in light of this. ‘I have come to the conclusion that this order of reading [TS, BE, LW], which somewhat [emphasis added] conventionally corresponds to the chronological order of the books’ publication and thus to their author’s trajectory as a philosopher and militant, even though it runs counter to the more common practice among English speaking readers who tend to start with one or other of the books published and translated after Being and Event, makes all the difference in the world in terms of the image of thought that can be attributed to Badiou’s philosophy as a whole. Above all, there where a privileged focus on Being and Event frequently leads to the conclusion that this thinker’s trajectory involves a clean and irreversible break away from the tradition of the dialectic, Theory of the Subject allows the reader both to nuance, if not exactly refute, this conclusion as far as the idea of the break itself is concerned and to uncover subtle dialectical threads even in the overall metaontological argumentation which, grounded in a

both returns to and restates these other texts. And in this book we will concentrate particular attention on the small section post-ironically named ‘Whither Mathematics’ where he seeks to explain his decision to minimise the mathematics in support of the experience of the ‘subject’. This short section ends with Bosteels taking as cue Adorno’s remark about reading Hegel,⁴⁹ thus marking a transitivity between Hegel and Badiou that will ground his larger inversion of Badiou’s project. In reading Badiou, Bosteels says, ‘Every logical and ontological operation, however formal it may well seem to be, must thus be related against the grain to the experiential core that conditions it.’⁵⁰ In other words, Bosteels reads the dialectic that is (not) in Badiou via the mathematical interruption that is not one. The aim, then, is not to turn things right side up yet again, but to insist on the break with this re-turning.

Like Hallward, Bosteels seems ‘conceptually’ unmoved by the ‘mathematical turn’ as he puts it,⁵¹ or rather, ‘removed from it’ and like Hallward, these works written over a decade essentially make the same criticism.⁵² It is clear, as noted, that for Bosteels ‘minimising the importance of the mathematical framework’ is the key to insisting on Badiou’s Hegelian lineage.⁵³ On this significant point he agrees entirely

solid command of set theory, is supposed to come after this break’ (Bosteels 2009, p. ix). In an enlightening note – and leaving aside the fact that this is his own ‘trajectory’ – seeking to justify this reading strategy, Bosteels suggest that the common bias that a philosophical oeuvre is like a Bildungsroman – a progression progressing from early mistakes and lost illusions to ever more perfected insights – is facile and should be questioned. ‘After all’, he continues, ‘literary oeuvres are rarely considered to operate to this form’. Is it not the case however, that the young man of the Bildungsroman always returns home and reconciles with the ‘transcendental of the father’? Paradoxically, Bosteels own prescribed progressive reading (the works must be read in this order TS, BE LW) coupled with the insistence that LW does return, conceptually, to TS, thus fulfilling the trajectory for which BE too is a milestone, seems to suggest that he is precisely describing a Bildungsroman? And if so this would be ‘wrong’?

49 ‘Hegel has to be read against the grain, and in such a way that every logical operation, however formal it seems to be, is reduced to its experiential core’. Bosteels 2011, p. 42.

50 Bosteels 2011, p. 42-3.

51 Bosteels 2011, p. 3.

52 Bosteels notes that 2002’s ‘The Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism’ and ‘On the Subject of the Dialectic’ are incorporated into the 2011 book.

53 Bosteels 2011, p. 33. Bosteels’ translation of *Peut-on penser la politique?* has been ‘forthcoming’ for some time. Written in 1985 it offers hints of the transition Badiou was in the process of and Bosteels often cites it precisely because it seems to combine elements of TS and BE. This 1985 text, when it is published, will be (have been) the most recent of Badiou’s books translated by Bosteels.

with Hallward.⁵⁴ Ironically, it’s almost as if this decision of Badiou – that mathematics is ontology – is taken too literally by Bosteels (and Hallward) in the sense that they suppose that a philosophy exists of Badiou ultimately untouched by this ontology, the ‘science of being qua being’ and, as such, one of the four conditions of such a philosophy.⁵⁵

In short, it can almost appear as if the abstraction and thus the separation that is Being and Event from all ‘established knowledge’, never took place. Or paradoxically, if it did, ‘nothing took place but place’. That is to say, Being and Event rather than providing the generic force of the subject via the most rigorous formalisation of its possible being, announces only a more spectacular variation on its end. Or again: the genericity of the subject finally separates a subject from all it can do. The silent sophistical caveat being that what it can do is always already known. But then again it’s also worth asking: is this division which both Hallward and Bosteels describe in their own fashion between abstraction and relations, or dialectics and mathematics even tenable, even, dare we say it, related to Badiou’s philosophy in any rigorous way? Indeed, what havoc does Bosteels’ understanding of the very title of Being and Event as the presentation of an identity of opposites (thus ignoring the various functions of and) come to play in all he surveys? And indeed what havoc does it play when he understands the relation between Being and Event and Logics of Worlds to be organized by the ‘vanishing mediator’ of the Theory of the Subject, going so far, Žižek like, as to revise Badiou’s own maxim to indemnify this claim.⁵⁶ Bosteels seeks to raise the subject to the ‘level’ of being and event. However, given the subject, to have any subjectivity beyond what is always already ascribed to it, is and must be the finite force of their disjunction, this dialectical flattening has the consequence of reinscribing the subject as a phenomenon like any other: A ‘yet one more’ that must come to be subject to this absolute order. Treating the texts in this similar way, that Logics of Worlds is the rewriting of Being and Event under condition of Theory of the Subject is fundamentally an overthrowing of Badiou’s return of philosophy to itself. What type of subjectivity – faithful, reactionary or obscurantist – offers itself in this overthrow?

54 ‘Two badgers on the same hill’ to poach a Chinese saying.

55 This as such is critical.

56 Bosteels 2011, p. 199. Instead of ‘there are bodies and languages except that there are truths’, Bosteels writes ‘there is only being and event except that there is also the subject’.

Bosteels is certainly alive to every mention of the dialectic in Badiou's work, literally so as we will see, and contends that Badiou is not only a 'post-dialectical thinker' but, in Hegel's wake, a resolutely 'post-dialectical thinker'.⁵⁷ But two further questions must animate our enquiry: is there in this effort of Bosteels a conflation or a suturing between politics and philosophy? The overwhelmingly majority of references in Bosteels elucidations are political and in his latest work he is clear, to the point of the exclusion of all else, that this is his central concern. Is this where he seeks Badiou's materialism such that politics is the essential matter of a properly dialectical philosophy or philosophy as dialectic? If so and again: what of the other 'conditions' and what of the 'return of philosophy to itself'? What of the Platonism of the multiple or even a Platonic gesture? Indeed, there is little room for Plato here at all, sublated as he is in the glow of the Absolute. This is most apparent, let's note in passing, in the problem Bosteels forges for himself regarding the logic of the generic, that of how a truth comes to knowledge: as 're-collection' decided at a point.

Second, how can this dialectic be thought, that is, what is the place and operation of the dialectic? This is especially key given that it cannot be an ontological conception, given that the Platonic gesture, mathematics, interrupts all such law like processes⁵⁸ separates, in fact, situated knowledge from itself, capable as it is of 'both providing schemas adequate to experience and of frustrating this experience by way of conceptual inventions that no intuition could ever accept'.⁵⁹ Which is to say, the subject of experience cannot be guaranteed by dialectic. The last great effort to do this in some fashion, Lacan, fails for Badiou precisely by putting together ('on the same plane'), a la Hegel

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57 Bosteels 2012, p. xxxvii.

58 Badiou 2005, p. 169. The question for Bosteels' Hegelian inspired maintenance of the dialectic in Badiou must 'avoid' this key problem in Hegel or it has to be shown that Badiou is wrong on this. 'In other words, Hegel fails to intervene on number. He fails because the nominal equivalence he proposes between the pure presence of passingbeyond in the void (the good qualitative infinity) and the qualitative concept of quantity (the good quantitative infinity) is a trick, an illusory scene of the speculative theatre. There is no symmetry between the same and the other, between proliferation and identification. However heroic the effort, it is interrupted de facto by the exteriority itself of the pure multiple. Mathematics occurs here as discontinuity within the dialectic. It is this lesson that Hegel wishes to mask by suturing under the same term-infinity-two disjoint discursive orders.'

59 Badiou 2004, p. 73.

in fact, the subject and the void; which Badiou resolutely does not do because, as he shows, it cannot be. As we will see below, Bosteels must do this (using lack and void interchangeably) in order to include, which is to say, foreclose in reaction, the very discourse that rationally, formally, which is to say, without recourse to a theory of the subject, inscribes as : the place of its own impasse!

The greater problem Bosteels has, then, and this comes to the fore in the latest book, is not so much that he seeks to account for Badiou's politics, a subject of politics or even that he might seek to account for this politics with relation to Badiou's philosophy (all this being perfectly normal), but that to support the account he gives fundamentally requires the very philosophy (a philosophy conditioned by the four conditions) which this very reductive (reduced to being read through the theories of Theory of the Subject) reading 'has done with'.

Mentions

In a long footnote to his Badiou and Politics, Bosteels takes Fabian Tarby (and others by suggestion) to task for 'hurling back at him against his reading of Badiou' the claim that the dialectic does not feature in Being and Event. Bosteels' claims that this is literally not true, as there are 'at least 25 mentions'; and more importantly (though he doesn't say that it is so) the accusation is un-true for 'broader interpretive reasons.' Our count turns up 37 page instances, and approximately 50 'mentions'.⁶⁰ We obviously cannot go into them all but a quick summary is appropriate to show something about Bosteels' 'literalist' reading strategy (and that Tarby is actually correct).

Unsurprisingly, the Hegel meditation (Med.15) contains the largest subset – and then only to point out the hallucinations regarding the infinite upon which its trajectory through the 'chicanes of the pure multiple' relies (BE 170). Pascal that 'qualified dialectician' (BE 214) and one whose intellectual force, conditioned by new realities in thought, is focused on subjective capture as its interventionist and militant vocation (BE 222), also counts several. It appears in the context of the 'old Marxism' whose 'force and absolute weakness', Badiou says, 'had

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60 4, 12, 58, 81, 83, 222, 232 331,165, 167,173, 168, 110,117, 235, 248, 272, 482 (notes), 104, 97, 157, 281, 289, 170, 214, 256, 239, 157, 272, 146, 169, 97, 109, 216, 162, 90. In the coming section all references to BE are in-text.

lain in its postulation of just such a compatibility in the shape of the generality of the laws of the dialectic, which is to say the isomorphy between the dialectic of nature and the dialectic of history. This (Hegelian) isomorphy was, of course, still-born' (BE 4): from which the only way out, for Badiou, in Theory of the Subject, that is, was to pursue beyond Lacan himself, the clear Lacanian doctrine concerning the real as the impasse of formalisation.⁶¹ The key to Being and Event, Badiou contends, is that this impasse can itself be thought, that is, formally presented, rather than 'supposed'.⁶² Some mentions are singular, such as that of Lautman's 'dialectical Ideas' or the 'Heideggerian dialectic' (BE 12), and so on. Most are not 'flattering' references, nor is the dialectic embedded anywhere in the entire edifice in any productive or demonstrative argument and, as such, these mentions can be counted only in support of Tarby's certainly interpretive rather than literal claim that BE doesn't 'say a word about the dialectic'.⁶³

Yet, as Bosteels points out, there are several mentions that might have interpretive import: exterior interpretive import, in the sense that one might try to mount a claim that in phrases such as 'the dialectic of being and event' (BE 232), or the 'subtle dialectic of knowledges and post-evental fidelity' (BE331),⁶⁴ there is something, necessarily grounded elsewhere (or why would you need a mathematical ontology?). And these as traversing what is otherwise separating itself, on the basis of an irrefutable inconsistency, from all that has gone before in terms of conceptual orientation. As if Badiou – à la the Straussian reading of Plato – retains an esoteric core, for dialectical initiates only.

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61 Badiou notes here that he was stuck in the 'frame of Theory of the Subject,' 'caught in the grip of a logicist thesis' which he succinctly elaborates and links to the 'universally recognised Anglo-American distinction between formal and empirical sciences' (BE 5). We have already mentioned where this way out fails. Still we should note that the conception of the real as what mathematics alone marks is already realised in 'Infinitesimal Subversion' contra Hegel.

62 In RDM2 (2002) and in Badiou and Politics (2011), Bosteels cites as a key wrong turn the move from Lacan's maxim concerning the impasse of formalisation to BE's forcing of the impasse. He writes 'Theory of the Subject, which also argues that from the real as the impasse of formalization we should be able to grasp formalisation as the forceful passing of the real. The earlier work indeed seems to me much more effective in explaining where exactly this thesis imposes a vital step beyond psychoanalysis—a step which the later work barely signals in the title of its final part: 'Forcing: Truth and Subject' & 'Beyond Lacan' (Bosteels 2002, p.198).

63 Bosteels, 2011, fn. 17, p. 354.

64 Which he goes on to say is 'the kernel of being of the knowledge/truth dialectic.'

Bosteels names those of interpretative import as: the dialectics of 'void and excess' (3 mentions in 526 pages)⁶⁵, the one and the many, presentation and representation, event and intervention, truth and knowledge, (1 each) which he says 'after all, constitute pivotal moments in the book'.⁶⁶ Indeed, these are pivotal moments but this does not by any means make the dialectic pivotal. Suffice to say, and any reader can look this up, all these instance-mentions are decidedly nominal, at best descriptive or to use Bosteels' own words, which he rather flippantly directs at the mathematical condition, 'at best heuristic, at worst analogies'.⁶⁷ Nowhere in Being and Event does Badiou recommence the dialectic, quite the contrary. In other words there is absolutely no mention of the dialectic in Being and Event. Nevertheless, 'man being the measure of all things' any individual is free to insist to the contrary.

The modesty of nuance, the pathos of inversion

To be sure, Bosteels at times nuances his conception of the dialectic, under pressure from the mathematical interruption, but his goal, plainly or perhaps wholly Hegelian, avowedly political, immodest, is to reestablish the dialectic as the mode proper to any philosophy such that it serves subjective experience, resolutely political.⁶⁸ Which is to say, to promote such a notion via the work of a philosopher. The problem Bosteels confronts is effectively Badiou's own conception of what is philosophy: That 'abstraction is the foundation of all thought' or 'that thought should always establish itself beyond categorial oppositions, thereby delineating an unprecedented diagonal, is constitutive of philosophy itself'.⁶⁹ In other words, as intimated, the problem is in submitting not so much the diagonal – or in fact subtraction, supplementation or declaration – to the dialectic, this is problematic enough given in both the Meno and in Cantor the diagonal subverts the dialectic (of sophistic knowledge, of ordinality, respectively and similarly) but ultimately – and this is especially Bosteels' problem

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65 Bosteels says 'several' in Think Again (2004, p. 159), and indeed, this is integral to his reading.

66 Bosteels 2011, fn. 17, p. 354. He might have added in this vein: illegality/height of order; discontinuous/continuous; of the already/ and the still more; and of being and event itself!

67 Bosteels 2011, p. xviii.

68 Bosteels 2011, p. 163 passim.

69 Badiou 2004, p. 69. Bosteels cites this in his introduction to the Adventure of French Philosophy, 2012.

given his wont to prioritise the subject over (or under) ontology (in fact to make ontology subjective) – to submit the very ‘law of the subject’, forcing, to this priority, which he indeed attempts, rhetorically, in Badiou and Politics.

Putting the subject before what establishes it as possible effect is a peculiar sort of inversion of order. However, Bosteels does not try to invert this order – which is to say the ‘order’ relation of being and event (the event is not being qua being but every event has being) – so much as insist that it’s not even there. For Bosteels, or at least for his claims to function, knowledge as bound up in the subject of the dialectic remains primary and truth merely incidental – and thus events cannot be eventual but merely adjuncts of the absolute.⁷⁰ And this is why many of his claims are rooted in an intrusion of language rather than conceptual demonstration: that is, the concepts and categories of Being and Event, those Badiou sees as offered for deployment ‘across the entire system of reference’,⁷¹ including ‘forcing’,⁷² constantly come wrapped in the (non-or rather quasi- ontological qua Being and Event) language of Theory of the Subject – logic of scission, torsion, lack and so on – and Bosteels makes no bones about their becoming imperceptible.⁷³ In short this is what Badiou would call, yet again, a constructivist (or even nihilist) orientation, ‘one that prefers itself to every situation’.⁷⁴ One that entirely misses the point of what mathematics is for Badiou:

70 In fact abstraction is something like the necessary separation of the thought of the new from the knowledge of the situation. The subject, then, is what traverses subtractively the situation anew, conditioned by this separating ‘axiom’.

71 Badiou 2005, p. 10.

72 Bosteels 2011, p. 189.

73 Bosteels 2011, p. 160 passim. See also Bosteels 2001, 2002 and 2004 and so on. As we say, he is not smuggling them in but seems to really see them as contiguous. It is worth noting that he builds into his rhetorical strategy a certain out. Like Hallward in his critique of Logics of Worlds cited above (2008), Bosteels uses a lot of hesitations such as: ‘seems to’, ‘if this is still appropriate’, ‘to a large extent’ and so on. It has that passive aggressive feel familiar from Žižek but not original in him.

74 Badiou 2009, p. 16. See Bosteels 2011, Chapter 5, ‘Forcing the truth’ which gives no exposition of forcing at all, but defers for the most part to an exegetical tour of who and what is not Badiou: the better to set up the latter’s return to the ‘materialist dialectic’ (187). But as in much of the work, to say this is both true and not true! For in fact he does give some ‘exposition’ but it is not of ‘forcing’ in BE but forcing as read through the terminology and ‘perspective’ of TS. Bosteels just does not seem to take seriously what even he remarks: that forcing is not a concept until BE. Instead, he looks for its genesis, shall we say, in TS, plainly ignoring Badiou’s own professed genealogy and this, then, is meant to serve as the truth of the concept and so our orientation. It reads at times like an evolutionary biology.

‘...mathematics, far from being an abstract exercise that no one needs to be vitally pre-occupied with, is a subjective analyser of the highest calibre. The hostility that increasingly surrounds mathematics—too distant, they say, from ‘practice’ or ‘concrete life’—is but one sign among many of the nihilist orientation that little by little is corrupting all the subjects bowed under the rule of democratic materialism.’⁷⁵

Whither wither?

For Badiou, Bosteels freely declares, ‘Set theory serves no more noble cause than to formalise how humanity can become a part greater than the sum of its elements’⁷⁶. This quaint and anti-anti-humanist formulation leads Bosteels to pose a question to himself: ‘Whither mathematics?’ Doing so certainly demonstrates some capacity for self-reflection or at least an acknowledgement of what others have said concerning each of his prior engagements with Badiou, at least since Bosteel’s double article, ‘The Return of Dialectical Materialism’ but it turns out, of course, that he was right all the time, even if he has no capacity (and so never had), he modestly tells us, to show us why.⁷⁷

Two epithets introduce us to this section of Badiou and Politics: One from an essay in Theoretical Writings, post-Being and Event, concerning the unique capacity of mathematics to maintain that ‘if thought can formulate a problem, it can and will solve it’, regardless of time. The second, from Theory of the Subject, begins ‘Except ...’ and goes on to give a dialectical conception, grounded in lack as remainder, of the acquisition of knowledge via the ‘nameless movement through which the real appears’.⁷⁸ This is consistent with Bosteels decade long reading strategy, which seeks to clarify the obscurities of philosophical abstraction by re-reading everything post 1985 via everything prior to it – with Can Politics be Thought being considered as some sort of key to the whole mission not unlike the errant key Gregory Vlastos finds in Plato’s Meno at 81d.⁷⁹

75 Badiou 2009, p. 16.

76 Bosteels 2011, p. 33.

77 Bosteels 2011, p. 42.

78 Bosteels 2011, p. 33

79 Vlastos claims very hysterically, we might add, that the elenchus (the so-called Socratic dialogues) is essentially abandoned in the face of the geometric paradigm. Vlastos 1991, p. 119.

We note the use of these as epithets because they preface his claim to be 'precise' about the function of mathematics in Badiou's thought: a precision, apparently, no-one else, and especially not those 'most admiring readers' for whom the formalisation is 'canonical',⁸⁰ have yet articulated – not even Badiou himself if Bosteels is correct. Thus:

In minimizing the importance of the mathematical framework, then, am I not disabling a proper understanding of this thinker's singularity, or worse, falling into the traps of a vulgar cultural bias for which mathematics is either too hermetic and coldly abstract or else, in a politically correct inversion of the same bias, too masculine, falsely universalist but actually elitist, and at bottom Eurocentric?⁸¹

Indeed. But of course all this is true. Remember, the reduction of the latter (BE, formalisation) to the former (TS, subjectivism) is Bosteels key reading strategy, to make sure that the dialectic shines through like the sun into the cave. He articulates this 'precision' in 4 points but first makes a few preliminary claims.

Claims

Being and Event, Bosteels contends, is constructed of a 'layered combination' of three kinds of analytical presentation: 'conceptual, intuitive and strictly mathematical'. This is the case for the order of meditations themselves but a 'similar threefold presentation also recurs within almost every type of meditation', he claims. This is the same for Logics of Worlds, he contends.⁸² Even though he devotes a chapter to the 'move' from Being and Event to Logics of Worlds (via Theory of the Subject), we will leave this aside here. For us, Being and Event is what makes the return impossible. We will follow whither where it goes.

Bosteels contends that the reason for this layering is that the 'intrinsic truths' of mathematics eventually run up against the doxa of common beliefs. Thus, he is suggesting that the strictly mathematical

80 Bosteels 2011, p. 63-4. Bosteels is not shy of ramping up the rhetoric. Indeed what sort of appeal is this, to remark canonical as inherently slavish and passé.

81 Bosteels 2011, p. 33.

82 Bosteels 2011, p. 36. That LW presents itself as Books, Scholia, Appendices, Dictionaries and Sections and TS as a Seminar and that only BE presents Meditations raises the question of the relation between this 'three kinds of analytical procedure' and the genre of their transmission. Why the difference if they are all basically the same?

aspects of the analysis in Being and Event are organised so to be in dialectical relation with this doxa. There is a sort of vacillation: Each return to intuitive language, to the dangers of 'natural language', which Badiou 'smuggles in to his exposition' as 'illustrative counterweight' is then resubmitted to the matheme.⁸³ The struggle, as Bosteels puts it, between mathematics and opinion (intuitions, finitude, obscurantism) is recommenced over and again within Being and Event, and thus philosophy, in a reversal of what Plato contends is the place of mathematics, is rendered metaxu by Bosteels' reading. It is philosophy, then, that comes to mediate between mathematical formalism and that which returns again and again in struggle with it – the 'human condition of our finitude'.⁸⁴

Against the blind disciples of mathematical rationalism i.e. the 'die-hard fans of Badiou's

otherwise undeniable mathematical propensity'⁸⁵ (and, as such, in a seamless return to Althusser)⁸⁶, Bosteels contends, glossing without constraint Badiou's discussion of the non-relation between mathematics and dialectics via way of the signifier and the symptom in Theory of the Subject,⁸⁷ that mathematics too, struggles against its own ideological tendencies. But it is through philosophy (the onto / theological struggle in theory?) that this struggle takes place or as he says, the 'concepts of philosophy' serve as the in-between of these two determinate tendencies 'opening up' the space of their struggle. Thus hard mathematical labour and the 'laziness of intuitive language' whose

83 Bosteels 2011, p. 36.

84 Given we are free to cite BE.

85 Bosteels 2011, p. 35. Emphasis added.

86 Bosteels 2011, p. 3.

87 Cf. TS, 'Torsion,' May 2, 1977, p. 148: 'The backdrop for all this is the understanding that in grappling with language, the mathematical formalisms perform a desubjectivization only at the cost of exploiting to the maximum – to death – the signifiers to which the subject is sutured. Consider also the fascination that Marx and Engels feel for differential calculus and their somewhat naive intent to seek therein the matrix of the 'laws of the dialectic'; or Marx's fallacious conviction, displayed in his numerous writings on mathematics, that he was a mathematician because he was a dialectician. These are all signs that the enigma of writing is tied to the fantasy of a formalized dialectic. With mathematics being its restricted specialty from which, upon close scrutiny, it would be possible all the same to extract the universal principle. We should abandon this path in favour of the one I am indicating, which holds that words resonate within a demonstration well beyond the level of inferences for which they serve, even though this echo is nowhere to be heard except in the actual understanding of the chain of adduced proofs.'

'spontaneity' is tied to 'human finitude' become equally necessary to the precise conceptualisation of philosophy for Bosteels. The dialectic(ian) after all is the true subject of the piece and thus any break one constitutes with the other is internal to the unbreakable force of the dialectic which is absolute.

Bosteels, second claim supposes the 'double inscription' of mathematics in Being and Event: as ontology and as condition. But the consideration he gives has less to do with this question (as a situation capable of truth and as the discourse of being qua being) than with establishing that mathematics is really or 'precisely' the immanent form of a political inscription. Bosteels, such is his symptom, takes up the well-known claim of Badiou in Meditation 8 that he uses the term 'state' to mark the power-set because of its 'metaphorical affinity with politics'.⁸⁸ This 'metaphorical convenience'⁸⁹ Bosteels claims, means that politics and mathematics cannot be considered as two distinct conditions for philosophy but are 'put into relation' by this metaphor, and are both, then, combined with the 'history of philosophy' via Badiou's citation of Hegel ('or what Hegel calls the One-One'), to be 'precisely' the three domains between which philosophy 'circulates'.⁹⁰

Bosteels suggests, but doesn't go on with it, that the 'history of philosophy' might be a fifth condition. We mention this only because in the essay *On a Finally Objectless Subject*, Badiou, in passing, admits religion as a possible truth procedure (although he never mentions the dialectic)⁹¹ and also, obviously, because it's a rather large claim to make in the face of Badiou's entire philosophical system – one in which the four conditions remain the basis, to this day.⁹² So for Bosteels, on the basis of a 'metaphorical affinity' which he doesn't explore here, but which he associates with the supposed 'dialectic of void and excess'

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88 Badiou 2005, p. 95 (emphasis added).

89 Bosteels 2011, p. 37 (emphasis added), cites the French phrase 'Par une convenance métaphorique'

90 Bosteels 2011, p. 37.

91 Badiou, 1991, pp. 24-32. It is mentioned in a footnote.

92 In a recently published essay he describes plans for a third book in the Being and Event 'series' (which is to be called BE III: The Immanence of Truths). In this essay he declares the conditions for philosophy to be still only 4. Badiou 2011, pp. 7–24. Bosteels is not the first to propose a fifth condition: See Žižek, Zupancic and Clemens.

(which the subject qua 'forcing' comes to supplement), mathematics and politics, become a sort of super condition, one which, to be sure, will allow Bosteels to indulge his non-expertise⁹³ – which, as Badiou points out in at least two places, is easily overcome with effort – and so confine himself anyway to the politics: wherein lies, by dialectical reasoning, his expertise.

But he doesn't quite leave it there. His claim to the transitory nature of the politics and mathematics, organised around this affinity, is bolstered by, first, the claim that when Badiou does suppose to explain this affinity in Meditation 9, that what we get instead is an effect of torsion.⁹⁴ That is to say, Badiou only further strengthens the implicit relation marking this super condition, thereby 'compounding the problems of formalisation outside mathematics' by invoking as operative in 'historico-political' situations meta-mathematical concepts such as 'excrescence, singularity and normality' and thus, as Bosteels phrases it, 'in a strange torsion, what is now presented as the illustrative verification of a metamathematical concept in the historico-political domain was said earlier to have been imported into metamathematics, by reason of a metaphorical affinity, from the realm of politics!'⁹⁵ This 'torsion' between the ontological and the political, which for Bosteels is thereby implicit in all of Being and Event (and Logics of Worlds), is supposed to reveal Badiou's 'sleight of hand' in the latter works. This torsion rendered explicit grounds his reading of the oeuvre as a sustained meditation on the dialectic. Its effect is to realise in Badiou nothing short of a political philosophy.

And yet, in *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou already notes that: 'the term 'torsion' designates the subject point from which the other three classic determinations of truth come to be coordinated: totality, coherence, and repetition. This then reminds me that, besides its topological use (as in the torsion of a knot, following Lacan's lead), the word 'torsion' is also used in algebra in a very simple way (149).'⁹⁶ Without going into all the hoary details provided in the Torsion

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93 Bosteels 2011, p. 41-2

94 This key term of TS is used 11 times in BE.

95 Bosteels 2011, p. 38.

96 Badiou 2009a, p. 149.

seminar – which in themselves are taut summaries of the algebraic cum topological constitution of torsion in its various configurations: elements, groups, modules, free, finite, infinite, etc. – at its most basic what torsion provides is a formalisation of the interruption of repetition and/or the forging of a divergence. Torsion is the point at which or by which ‘the cumulative is inverted into a loss’.⁹⁷ Badiou notes that he has not attempted to mathematize anything but to ‘search in existing mathematics for those places that hold in reserve the means to take a step beyond’.⁹⁸ In other words, that the impasse of a dialectical construction requires, ‘unorthodoxly’, that ‘an unexplored mathematical lead must force the divergence’ thought (or praxis) requires.⁹⁹

Points viewed as commonplace

Bosteels summarises this ‘sleight of hand’ in 4 points that are to stand as the grounds of his case against his imaginary(?) accusers or inexistent others and, as noted, as the basis of his claims to the primacy of the (pre-ontological) dialectic. Before we look at these points, which do not so much argue this case as seek historical instances of it, it needs to be remarked that Bosteels has staked a lot on a ‘metaphor’ and an ‘example’ and there appears to be some sleight of hand of his own at work here. Namely, that by recourse to the unconditional use of a metaphor and an example Bosteels has managed to avoid talking about the very mathematics he wants to avoid talking about by recourse to Badiou’s conditional use of a metaphor and an example. This is not a performative contradiction but something perhaps worse, a performative tautology. That is to say, by use of ‘ordinary language’ he has managed to reduce the specificities of ontological discourse, a very condition of the discourse of philosophy, of its deployment of (rather than return to) language, to metaphors and examples, seemingly suggesting that Badiou has confused the two or more profoundly, and again similar to Hallward’s claim above concerning ‘strategy’, that an entire ontological edifice, and we need to include, as does Bosteels in this, *Logics of Worlds*, is reducible to a crude ruse masking an

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97 Badiou 2009a, p. 171.

98 Badiou 2009a, p. 171.

99 Badiou 2009a, p. 154.

‘altogether different nature’.¹⁰⁰

Bosteels has something of a pedagogue’s fascination for the readers of Badiou. At times they are over enthusiastic devotees of the mathematics, at other times dupes lost in the metaphors, affinities and examples of Badiou’s philosophical ‘torsions’. They are ‘blameless’, he says, those readers who consider that the introduction of the term ‘state of the situation’, the ‘meta-mathematical name for the power-set’, is ‘conditioned by politics as one of the four truth procedures’.¹⁰¹ Of course they are blameless if, like him, they read *Being and Event* not from the perspective of the declaration that ontology is mathematics (and if they modestly profess their ignorance of it), but from that of *Theory of the Subject*, wherein Badiou says, as Bosteels cites, he makes no distinction between the algorithms and theorems and the political terminologies and ‘contents they organise’. As a Marxist Badiou says, ‘this is a matter of indifference to me’.¹⁰²

All well and good! But is it good enough to cite, as Bosteels does, highly attuned to the symptomal reading strategy he is forced to adopt, that Badiou says this in 1982, in regard to ‘algebra and topology’ as if this equates to 1988 and *Set theory ontology* (not to mention that Badiou will not avow his Marxism in quite the same way ever again)? This is what Bosteels wants us to accept, indeed, his entire effort depends on it, because all the rest – that the ‘dialectical formulations’ of *Theory of the Subject*, including those of the ‘dialectical algorithms’, ‘are rooted in explicit political practice’ – we already know (sort of).¹⁰³

Bosteels continues to quote from *Theory of the Subject*, making use of Badiou’s own analysis of the place of mathematics itself and

.....
100 Bosteels 2011, p. 38. Cf. 2011, p. xviii. In his preface Bosteels repeats the claim made in his earlier essays, that outside ontology the role of ontology is ‘heuristic at best and analogical at worst’. This justifies him, he says with all modesty, attributing it a modest role in his analysis. As we have said, expose the politics by all means, engage TS and every early work, it’s not invaluable (and Bosteels makes a good fist at demonstrating this) but philosophy is not politics, which is to say, if the analysis or exposition of the latter requires the former, then the repressed returns. And recall, ‘A contemporary philosopher, for me, is indeed someone who has the unfaltering courage to work through Lacan’s anti-philosophy (Badiou 2008, p. 129).

101 Bosteels 2011, p. 38.

102 Bosteels 2011, p. 38.

103 Bosteels 2011, p. 38.

the conditions of its operation within a politically defined theory: specifically, it being symptomatic of itself with regard to some of its own 'words'. Thus Bosteels, ever keen to return to the subjective language of Lacan as motive force in Badiou (so long as it evades the ontological claims of mathematics and provides outside cover for 'the political'),¹⁰⁴ contends that its signifiers are its symptoms, meaning that mathematics is understood politically – its signs are registered outside itself for what they are – or in other words, mathematics is politically conditioned – as already noted. It is interesting to note this psychoanalytic inflection given that psychoanalysis like mathematics intrinsically refuses any a priori relation with politics, which is why such a relation as relation has to be thought from the 'outside'. In Theory of the Subject, Badiou is no doubt trying to think and construct such a relation as the reinvigoration of a dialectic that, following Sylvain Lazarus, takes politics, if not precisely history, as its 'subject'. Yet for Lacan no such subject is even possible thus thinkable: such is why for Badiou Lacan is 'the educator of every philosophy to come'.¹⁰⁵

But in Being and Event, and Bosteels points this out here as a failure of the latter (but which is really its strength) – whose sign anyway is the inversion of order: from the ontological meditations to the subjective –, nothing, and this precisely because of what ontology has to tell us about the being of any situation, describes the conditioning of one truth procedure by another.¹⁰⁶ What Bosteels is trying not to describe, positively, is suture, but the problem he must face is that without the ontological guarantee of the actuality of the difference of situational conditions, that one is absolutely distinct from another, relation or rapport is nothing but suture and indeed we would suggest that this insight can even be found in Theory of the Subject, even if it appears as part of the very impasse it produces. Indeed, after Being and Event philosophy is what it composes, meaning the four truth procedures exist singularly and irreducibly. But as composed, and this is

.....
104 Cf. Bosteels 2002, p. 199: 'Badiou's Being and Event in this sense can be said to be both more encompassing and more limited than his Theory of the Subject. More encompassing, insofar as the latter starts from the given that there is subjectivity, whereas the former work uses the deductive power of mathematics to give the subject its substructure in ontology. And more limited, insofar as the ontological definition of being, event, truth, and subject risks to remain caught in a structural dialectic which in reality is only half of the picture'.

105 Badiou 2004, p. 119.

106 Bosteels 2011, p. 39.

crucial, their formal similarities are exposed in and by the new discourse for which they are the conditions. Philosophy thinks as itself, as their composition, as what is the same. Theory of the Subject has no such theory of (immanent) composition such is why it relies on and struggles against its own history, whereas Being and Event has no such constraint and in fact must think the impasse of this constraint.

Ontological license

Continuing, Bosteels claims that 'anyone' familiar with the classics of Marxism-Leninism will know that despite the 'mathematical language [emphasis added]' in which it is 'seemingly phrased [emphasis added]' the 'typology of states of the situation' – 'normality, singularity, excrescence' is 'imported from the realm of militant politics'. And that Badiou is merely formalising a classic political principle, one he of course goes on to criticise politically, but, Bosteels points out, from the standpoint of the mathematical formalisation.¹⁰⁷ Thus Bosteels has his conditional (chalk?) circle again.

His point being that this makes it difficult to see how Badiou could be said to be arguing solely on the basis of the 'intrinsic rationality of set theory as the ontology of political [all in fact] situations'.¹⁰⁸ Given he is involved in a polemical defense of his own modesty with reference to mathematics, he addresses these comments to the mathematical purists – those 'obviously', who do not have a familiarity with the classics of Marxism-Leninism. These comments, he says, place us beyond the equation of mathematics and ontology. 'But' – and it is worth quoting this in full –

to understand this other domain, we should always come back to the principle 'ontology does not equal politics' since politics, like the events that punctuate the historicity of mathematics as a truth procedure, involves that which is not being qua being. In other words, there is no such thing as a political ontology. This expression only hides the tensions between politics and ontology.¹⁰⁹

.....
107 Bosteels 2011, p. 39.

108 Bosteels 2011, p. 35. Cf Bosteels, 2011a, p. 47, wherein Badiou (along with several famous contemporaries) is said, under the heading of 'the ontological turn', to propose a political ontology.

109 Bosteels 2011, p. 40.

We wish, for clarity sake, Bosteels would name this complex of diehards to which he keeps referring. As fairly avid readers of the commentary on Badiou over the years, it is difficult to identify the culprits here and if we could identify them maybe we wouldn't, for who among Badiou's well-informed commentators would argue any of what Bosteels claims is being argued?¹¹⁰ Is it just Sam Gillespie, named here as raising the 'question'? From the long foot note¹¹¹ attached to his name clearly not but it is hard to see, amongst all these names and those spoken of three footnotes later, who it is that argues these specific points, even if, as Bosteels says without irony, 'the contagious enthusiasm' of some of these mathematical die-hards for the 'Cantorian Revolution' is akin to suturing mathematics to philosophy.¹¹²

But anyway, what is it Bosteels is claiming? That there is a political ontology or that there isn't? That there is another domain outside 'mathematics as ontology'? Who denies that? That mathematics, which presents presentation is a condition and thus is capable of truths like any other condition? Who argues against this (or doesn't know that what it presents qua discourse is being qua being!)? But then again does militant politics qua 'subject' actually know what it is doing (as Bosteels imputes) or is it consecrated only in its act? Thus, could it really have known what mathematics had to discover as the true condition of any situation? What type of subject knows? Is politics really like the event? Yes, the event as what happens as opposed to what is, is 'not being qua being' but politics (qua subject) names a procedure, specific to its situation, which elaborates as itself the truth of

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¹¹⁰ As already set out for us in the preface: 'In fact, many readers will argue that this is precisely the most distinctive feature of Badiou's work, so that mathematics would actually meet, if not exceed, the importance of politics as the principal condition for his philosophy. However, as soon as we exit the domains of strict ontology and logic in the way Badiou defines them, namely as the discourses, respectively, of being and of appearing, then the role of mathematics becomes heuristic at best and analogical at worst. This justifies, in my eyes, the modest role attributed to mathematics in my reading of Badiou and politics.' See Bosteels 2011, p. xviii. That any such hierarchy exists between the conditions is simply false.

¹¹¹ Bosteels 2011, p. 361. See fn. 65.

¹¹² Bosteels 2011, p. 361-2. fn. 68. We cannot not note that Bosteels comments critically on Z. L. Fraser (2006, pp. 23-70) given Bosteels contends he makes a change in the mathematics of the subject, and singles out for faint praise Brian Anthony Smith (2006, pp. 71-100) because he more closely accords with Bosteels own 'astute' reading of what is at stake there – the separation of subject and ontology. He makes this determination despite being ignorant of the mathematics each brings to bear.

that situation. Its very possibility is predicated in the event and an event is named 'political' if it is situated in such a manner that it addresses anyone at all; if it is immediately 'universal'. But the truth procedure has being and, as such, is formally described and, as a new infinity of the situation, is subject to the laws or the thought of being which only mathematics can think or prescribe. It is not being qua being, and it is not without being (or non-being) either. Does politics, ultimately, license Badiou's ontology? This is not really a question for Bosteels so much as the underpinning claim that licenses in turn Bosteels' entire engagement with Badiou: after all 'it's only with this last condition' that he is concerned.¹¹³ By consequence or implication all that can be thought, yet again, is the subject as reaction at best and at worst, captured as it is by 'its' knowledge, obscurantist.

Politics, then, comes first. Bosteels claims that another way in which politics overdetermines the 'metaontological use of mathematics' is with regard to events themselves. It is only possible, he says, to give the 'historical discursivity' of mathematics in the wake of the situational events that expose to the subject the 'pure multiplicity of being qua being'.¹¹⁴ We suppose he is saying that the Cantor event is what allows us (its subjects?) to know what it was that the Cantor event was? Events expose the inconsistency at the heart of situations – to the subject. But is this really a matter of linear, or indeed, 'subjective' priority? Is the fact that an event alerts us to this really to say that what the event exposed was not already there? And is that not the point of the mathematical formalisation – to show us the 'what is' of 'what there is' and of 'what happens' without a subject? How is a political event which relies on the inconsistency at the heart of presentation, with regard to its situation and not every situation, that which educates us in this inconsistency as an ontological principle of all situations? Thus politics retroactivates ontology, which anyway has the subject as its end? Politics is spirit, no doubt: like a dog with a bone.

This is what Bosteels wants us to accept: that the subject teaches pure multiplicity and thus that the thinking of pure multiplicity, that is, thinking it as it is, is subject to its political conditioning and by virtue

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¹¹³ Bosteels 2011, p. 42. To even use the term condition is to implicate oneself in the structure to which it belongs – the very structure under erasure.

¹¹⁴ Bosteels 2011, p. 34.

of a metaphor or an example. He proposes in this section a crude phenomenology, that is to say, a return to the field of experience as the truth of causation and thus of our knowledge of being itself.¹¹⁵ Moreover, he tells us that because of our failure to experience inconsistency in this way, we fail to understand Being and Event, which must be read against itself – that is to say, from the theory of the subject – the last sections, then – back toward the front, the ontology.¹¹⁶

This notion, while clever, for it seamlessly, if somewhat decidedly crudely,¹¹⁷ meets up with the claim to read Being and Event through Theory of the Subject, is, as he later notes, simply applied Adorno.¹¹⁸ But this is nevertheless worth repeating here not only for the completely anti-Badiouean thought it affirms but also because it is the spirit of Bosteels' entire bone of contention. That is to say, for Bosteels the rational kernel of Badiou is Hegel: 'Hegel has to be read against the grain, and in such a way that every logical operation, however formal it seems to be, is reduced to its experiential core'.¹¹⁹ Of course, even the theory of the subject in Being and Event has to undergo the torsion of its existence by Theory of the Subject, to consistently satisfy all Bosteels

.....
115 Cf. Badiou 2009a, p. 115. 'The real that is ours depends only on this: there are two sexes; there are two classes. Busy yourselves with this, you subjects of all experience.' Indeed the two that is not one, and which is so in the affirmative exclusion of any middle or (ontological) relation, is a constant in all his work. This is to say, in Badiou, the non-rapport is thought, formally. Any supposed corrective needs first to deal with this.

116 See below. It is a constant of the book. See e.g. 163, where he says that Being and Event can be best summed up as a 'retrieval' of the final thesis of Theory of the Subject.

117 Bosteels 2011, p. 41. 'The possibility of thinking the sheer inconsistency of being qua being, which may appear to be the autonomous task of mathematics as elucidated in philosophy, thus arrives in actual fact only if and when there happens to be a subject at work who is faithful to an event, for instance in politics'. Emphasis added.

118 Bosteels 2011, p. 138-9.

119 Bosteels 2011, p. 42. Cf. Bosteels 2002. Again, Bosteels shows himself to be literalist. But does Badiou's own comparison of BEI and BEII with Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit and Logic of Sense really suggest this? 'In this respect, Logics of Worlds stands to Being and Event as Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit stands to his Science of Logic, even though the chronological order is inverted (Badiou 2009, p. 8).' But of course it is not BE and LW that is at issue for Bosteels but TS and BE. In one of many 'personal communications' or 'proximity' citations (cf. Preface to Bosteels 2011) he tells us: 'Badiou compares Being and Event to Hegel's Science of Logic, while considering Theory of the Subject more akin to the Phenomenology of Spirit in the sense of sticking as closely as possible to the experiential content of all concepts'. Of course we will have to take his word for it. But we do know that Badiou's (finally) subjectless objectal phenomenology (if we can call it that) in LW has nothing to say about experience: at least as it is understood here, by Bosteels. It is also worth wondering what Adorno would make of being cited for a phenomenologist.

demands.¹²⁰

Unspoken determinants, axiomatic opinions, the subject as end Point 4 begins: 'There is yet another unspoken determinant that seems to have been at work...'¹²¹ Yet another? Bosteels claims that the theorem of excess – which he later claims is simply a return to the 'materialist dialectic' of Theory of the Subject (a claim with its own problems)¹²² – cannot be 'transferred' (whatever that means) to politico-historical situations unless these too are infinite (which of course they are!).¹²³

However, as noted, to achieve this aim, which is of course for some 'newness in the situation', Bosteels is constrained, in order to get the tools for the job, to raid Badiou's philosophical apparatus.¹²⁴ Unfortunately for Bosteels, it's not like sticking your hands in the back of the plumber's truck and running for your life: you have to show the veracity of your claims vis à vis these very tools and he fails in his hurry at each turn. Symptomatic of this rush is where, in the chapter entitled 'The Ontological Impasse', he breaks off the 'metaontological' summary (with interpolation) of the trajectory of Being and Event at the point

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120 Cf. Bdiou 2009, pp. 47-8. Badiou opposes his theory of the subject to three '(dominant) determinations of the concept of the subject: 1) 'Subject' would designate a register of experience, a schema for the conscious distribution of the reflexive and the non-reflexive; this thesis conjoins subject and consciousness and is deployed today as phenomenology.'

121 Bosteels 2011, p. 41.

122 Bosteels 2011, p. 160. Cf. TS 121: 'Position 5, that of the materialist dialectic, admits not without having to pay a price which we will evaluate below that we must distinguish thought from sensible being. This is its objection to the radicality of mechanicism. What it retains from the latter – against Hegel – is that what is already there in the process of knowledge is taken from being, and not from the idea. As for the trajectory, it disposes in it the spiraling discrepancy of the new, whereby it excludes the idealist integral: from the Whole, no guarantee whatsoever follows. All truth is new, even though the spiral also entails repetition. What puts the innovative interruption into the circular flexion? A certain coefficient of torsion.'

123 Bosteels 2011, p. 41. Let's note here the use of politico-historical (Hallward uses 'socio-historical': see below). It is not only false in the context of Badiou, given that a historical situation simply names a situation that admits a site and therefore is applicable to artistic, amorous, scientific and political truths, but its falsity is purposeful insofar as Bosteels needs to sideline the conditions and the form of the conditional relation of the conditions to philosophy. The entire effort is to have done with the philosophical system in order to privilege and advance some kind of critical theory as aid to the return to, again, some kind of historical materialism. Historical is given top billing in this reading, over situation, thus allowing the return to History with a capital H – 'provided of course that these laws or axioms are properly reformulated' (Bosteels 2004, p. 159). And who should do that?

124 Bosteels 2011, p. xix & 2004, p. 164.

where the mathematics might intrude. Instead, Bosteels hurries to his political rescue of historical materialism, which, however, and this is key for Bosteels entire contention from the early essays on, depends entirely on the articulation of void (which he uses interchangeably with 'lack') and excess¹²⁵ (in short, the difference being that lack is a subjective effect, void structural/formal). For Bosteels, luckily, this 'structural fact of the ontological impasse, is already mediated by subjectivity'. That is to say, it's the subject that makes inconsistency 'visible'¹²⁶ (in fact it makes a new formal consistency called a 'truth' predicated on the eventual exposure of the void – thus inconsistency).¹²⁷ Thus, of course, 'intuitively', one must begin with the subject!

It's not inconvenient for Bosteels at all that in *Being and Event* Badiou argues the case for why, in this work, the subject comes last and why in fact the subject has no formative relation to ontology but is the junction of event and fidelity, precisely because, for Bosteels, *Being and Event* is the effort to obscure this very experience qua truth of the subject.¹²⁸ This move of Bosteels, relying on that 'nearly untranslatable' passage, which he supposes supports his contention, is grounded in his claim that historical situations must be infinite otherwise (as he forgets to say) the claims of situational excess and the errancy of

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¹²⁵ Bosteels tells us what is and what is not 'translatable'. Here (Bosteels 2011, p. 162) he repeats his claim from *RDM2* (2002) that the key passage (for him) in *Being and Event* concerning the pass of the subject at the impasse of being (unmeasure i.e.) is 'nearly untranslatable'. He manages to translate it (each time!), as do others, Oliver Feltham being one (Badiou 1988, p. 469; 2005, p. 429).

¹²⁶ Bosteels 2011, p. 162.

¹²⁷ Thus: 'For the purposes of what follows, this means above all to size up the iceberg of emancipatory politics that is all but hidden – if it has not already suffered a complete meltdown as a result of global warming – below the arctic waters of mathematical formalisation' (Bosteels 2011, p. 41). This conception of the subject (totally upside down as it is) vis a vis ontology, puts Bosteels squarely in the intuitionist camp, as described by Fraser 2006, pp. 23-70.

¹²⁸ Cf. Badiou, 2005, p. 239. 'For my part, I will call subject the process itself of liaison between the event (thus the intervention) and the procedure of fidelity (thus its operator of connection). In *Théorie du sujet* – in which the approach is logical and historical rather than ontological – I foreshadowed some of these current developments. One can actually recognize, in what I then termed subjectivization, the group of concepts attached to intervention, and, in what I named subjective process, the concepts attached to fidelity. However, the order of reasons is this time that of a foundation: this is why the category of subject, which in my previous book immediately followed the elucidation of dialectical logic, arrives, in the strictest sense, last. Much light would be shed upon the history of philosophy if one took as one's guiding thread such a conception of the subject, at the furthest remove from any psychology – the subject as what designates the junction of an intervention and a rule of faithful connection.'

measure upon which change is predicated 'won't hold water'.¹²⁹ But the infinity of situations, Bosteels says, turns out to be strictly axiomatic, which, like Hallward, he then reduces to 'a matter of conviction' and then to 'a personal preference pure and simple'.¹³⁰ As if these are all the same. Like Hallward, he busts down this open door, the open door of the axiomatic status of the marking of the 'unmeasure' of excess, prescribed in ontology itself, by citing as evidence the same interview (cited by Hallward) in *Infinite Thought*.¹³¹ Just how infinity post-Cantor might be thought without the axiom schema is difficult to realise. The pathos of finitude this way lies.

In his introductory essay in *Think Again* (point 3) Hallward asserts that two key [related] principles – the 'one is not' and 'every situation is infinite' – are actually socio-politically determined. They have more to do, he says, with assertions of 'modern scientific atheism' (mathematics?), than ontology (in Badiou's sense we presume).¹³² He says: '...as Cantor's own piety suggests, the fact that there can be no all-inclusive set of all sets does not by itself disprove the existence of a properly transcendent limit to the very concept of set (a limit to the distinction of 'one' and 'not-one'). The point, as he goes on to assert, citing the interview from *Infinite Thought*, is 'When pressed on this point, Badiou justifies his principles in terms of their strategic political utility, rather than their strict ontological integrity'.¹³³ Bosteels likewise quotes from this interview: 'When I say that all situations are infinite it is an axiom'.¹³⁴ For Bosteels this becomes then, in line with his subjectivist line of enquiry, 'a matter of ethics:' 'namely, the decision in favour of actual infinity over and against finitude – comparable to the assumption of an axiom for which no deduction or outside legitimations are available' [emphasis added]. What we are to understand from this, as in Hallward's case, is that an axiom is the same as an opinion and that one

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¹²⁹ Bosteels 2011, p. 41.

¹³⁰ Bosteels 2011, p. 41. Cf. Hallward 2004, fn 24, pp. 239-40.

¹³¹ Badiou 2004, p. 182 'Ontology and Politics'.

¹³² Hallward 2004, p. 15.

¹³³ Hallward 2004, p. 15.

¹³⁴ Bosteels 2011, p. 41. Badiou 2004, p. 182.

can by preference pass finitude by.¹³⁵

What Hallward fails to elaborate is that Badiou frames this in terms of an axiom and the pursuit of its consequences. This seems an obvious thing to point out but the failure to understand this very coupling axiom/consequence (decision/implication) is at the heart of Hallward's misconception. Moreover, it is a misunderstanding of great importance to suppose, as this implies, that the mathematical ontology determines the philosophy. Once again, this goes to the concept of conditions. In any event, the mathematics does not not support the philosophical – and not 'socio-political' or 'politico-historical' – conviction insofar as it is the very (rational) impossibility of enumerating excess that demands recourse to axioms, decisions or as he says in the interview cited, 'convictions'.¹³⁶

Very deliberately here, Badiou marks the relation between philosophy and mathematics to be one of fidelity. For Bosteels, on the other hand, the axiom, essentially, is little more than a subjective opinion: this because the subject, as what comes first as end, is what matters to him. Rather than complaining, as does Hallward, that Badiou lets ontology determine the philosophy (despite what he assumes is evidence to the contrary in the question of excess) he supposes that ontology touches on the real only subjectively; that is to say, a subject is what touches on what is ontologically valuable, and that, as above, this 'void/excess dialectic' is merely a formal catching up to what political militancy already knew.

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135 If we trust to Bosteels' citations here it's clear again that both Hallward and Žižek do not fully comprehend what Cantor means to Badiou's work. Like Peter Osborne (see *Radical Philosophy* 142, 200), they seem to assume that the return to classical categories is a return, tout court to classicism – Kantian or otherwise. Cantor makes such an orientation impossible, literally so and this means that philosophy must reconfigure these 'classical' categories – being, truth, subject – under this ineluctable condition. Of course, if one were to be resolutely post-modern or post-metaphysical one would throw out all such categories. We live precisely such a result.

136 Indeed, the next question of the interview asks Badiou if his mathematics supports this (the infinity of situations, axiomatisation and the pursuit of consequences) to which he replies 'Yes'! We should also note that he goes on to elaborate (yet again) the distinct discursive operations of mathematics/science and philosophy with regard to mathematics/science. Badiou 2004, pp. 182-3.

The problem confronting Bosteels' insistence on the dialectic – even if it is an 'untimely' one¹³⁷ – is firstly to affirm the very dualism he seeks to sublimate, between ontology and subject; secondly to position this dialectic somewhere else in Badiou's system. That is to say, the dialectic qua operation in thought must be thinkable in Badiou's own terms or Bosteels has to account for its imposition; thirdly, this 'application' of the dialectic cannot refer itself to politics alone. At least seasoned readers of Badiou might think this was the case. The question is, can Bosteels maintain the dialectic in Badiou in a way that sufficiently acknowledges the irreducibility of the multiple, which is to say, has no recourse to ends, progress or the Absolute, that in the end treats Hegel not as a father but as a site?

Rhetoric, reverse, affirmation

Our admittedly, at times, withering approach has two conditions: one, it is counter rhetorical in the sense that, as in Hallward, there is in Bosteels' elaborations a clear rhetorical trope at work; one designed to heighten certain aspects at the expense of others such that the critique has a place to insert itself and appear to function. We are not saying this is a falsification, any more than rhetoric ever is. Secondly, and this is divided in two, there is attached to this core formula cited, a long tail, as it were, which problematises Bosteels' claim that what this all means in the end is that the subject is the privileged feature in the conceptualisation of structure given that without the subject's intervention onto the scene the 'gap in structure' could not be 'visible'. Quite how we could see the void without, precisely, mathematical inscription is another matter, but it is not trivial. The visual metaphor is part of the conceptual problem Bosteels has and it is akin, funnily enough, to the accusation Callicles makes against Socrates for the crime of geometry: 'if things as are you say, Socrates, you will have the world turned upside down.'¹³⁸ Here, concurrent to having us read Being and Event backwards, Bosteels has turned the relation between truth

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137 See Bosteels 2002 and 2011, p. 2. Except that in a footnote he tells us explicitly that the claims that Being and Event breaks decidedly with the dialectic not only of TS but the dialectic altogether are overstated, over played and wrong. And in fact, rejecting Hallward's claims concerning Badiou's 'absolutism', Bosteels says that if Hallward's criticisms are meant to call for a more dialectical articulation then shouldn't we return – as a point of orientation – to the early works? See Bosteels 2011, fn. 17, pp. 353-4.

138 Plato, *Gorgias*, 481bc.

and knowledge upside down in order to support the dialectic at the heart of his political ontology.

The subject of course does not know, but is faithful to what happens and through this fidelity produces the unknown truth of the situation – to wit the state is not all, thus is marked at a point by its void and on the basis of which a new ‘set’ will have been inscribed in this situation such that situation is changed entirely – that is, a-void the state or knowledge of excess. The subject of course is neither the truth – being only a finite fragment of its eternity – nor is it the truth’s knowledge. It is the situated forcing of the former, conditioned by an event, through the morass of the latter. It is the mode of real change: this is without doubt, but the subject can only affirm that the situation is founded on nothing: it is not that which knows or in other words, has the discursive capacity to formalise the latter. In fact to suggest so is to cross two modes of analysis which are discrete, thus, being and event, but which together organise what is to be known of any multiple or what any multiple might come to be known as. The mathematics of structure determines, with no need of the subject, what structure is. By the same token the subject is not mathematisable but, as evental, poetic.

Bosteels’ attempt to implicate Cantor in this reading is only the compound of this ‘inversion’ insofar as the knowledge Cantor’s discovery produced was only that which was always already the truth of the situation of ontology. For it to be true, no subject is required at all, given, and this is what Meillassoux and Brassier trace in their own inimitable ways, that what the subject produces of this truth will come to be its knowledge as such. As noted already, Bosteels is dangerously close to a phenomenology, rejected by Badiou in all his works.¹³⁹ Badiou summarises that, ‘the impasse of being is the point at which a Subject convokes itself to a decision, because at least one multiple, subtracted from the language, proposes to fidelity and to the names induced by a supernumerary nomination the possibility of a decision without concept’.¹⁴⁰ However, the impasse of being is not a production of the

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¹³⁹ Again, Bosteels is free to pursue a phenomenological reading, and in Badiou and Politics (2011) he does defend a version of it from Badiou’s reductive depiction, but if this reading relies on Badiou’s larger philosophical invention (so to speak) then quite how what this invention breaks with can be reinstated to it and still function needs to be demonstrated.

¹⁴⁰ Badiou 2005, p. 429.

subject, it does not rely on the subject’s intervention, but guarantees that such an intervention will have been possible, indeed rational and moreover it guarantees the consistency (in fidelity) of the new (infinite) ‘situation’.

The above traces and puts into question the position Bosteels has come to over dialectics in Badiou over the last decade or so from the site of his own disavowal. The mathematical question is key because any claims to continuity in Badiou’s oeuvre, which Bosteels certainly wants to claim, stand or fall with Being and Event and the claims to mathematical ontology. Logics of Worlds, being a sequel, extends the requirements of formalisation to what Being and Event realises as impasse and, as such, affirms the trajectory and orientation underway. Moreover, this double affirmation consolidates an immanent break in the oeuvre ‘denumerated’ 1988, 2005. The problem for Bosteels is that the dialectic, specifically, that which he wants to say remains current throughout Badiou’s work, is intrinsically linked with a political paradigm which has ‘history’ at its core; the very thing that for Badiou ‘does not exist’. And it does not exist because that upon which it is predicated (as return), the One, has been rendered inconsistent by the one discourse that does not suffer opinion or theology: mathematics. If there is no history, then there is no dialectic. At least at the level of being or of what can be presented of presentation. Moreover, as Badiou shows in Logics of Worlds, negation, the very motor of the dialectic, appears only as the effect of a function (reverse) or a logical possibility, being otherwise unfounded in any world where truths come to be as exception.¹⁴¹ The ‘materialist dialectic’ proceeds by virtue of an immanent exception for which it itself cannot account – neither eventually nor formally.

Bosteels is acutely aware of this difficulty and its most manifest and symptomatic in his rhetoric, but to use his phrase, ‘does it hold water’? This is important for Bosteels, perhaps more than for us, for it’s the stake of his whole book: these ‘four factors’ – already articulated – ‘justify in my eyes the limited use of mathematics in the following interpretation of Badiou’s philosophy and politics’.¹⁴² We add the emphasis to wonder at what work the and is doing here, this time? Is

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¹⁴¹ Badiou 2009, p. 1.

¹⁴² Bosteels 2011, p. 41.

this conjunction, reduction or disjunction? How is his use of and to be related to his understanding of it confirming a dialectical double in the title Being and Event. Certainly, ‘anyone’ knows that Badiou’s philosophy is not his politics? But this is just to restate the question.

The immodesty of ignorance

Bosteels ends this last section with some rather unfortunate resentful claims as to the demands of those, as noted, unnamed ‘die-hard mathematical readers of Badiou’. He contends that his ignorance of mathematics, which he is so very modestly willing to admit, is more prudent than laying claims to a knowledge he doesn’t have: which is true, but only half the story, given one might make the effort to learn instead of crying poor. ‘What is more’, he says, again addressing imaginary friends, ‘to anyone [those mathematical die-hards he means] who cries foul when I confess to my being mathematically challenged, I could argue... that similar demands apply to [them] who often completely ignore the links of his thought to literature, to psychoanalysis or to politics’.¹⁴³ We don’t need to re-try these claims or ask who this applies too. Suffice to say that in the world of the dialectic it’s not simply that two wrongs make a right, although it might appear to be what it’s all about, but rather that the positive negation of a wrong (to be mathematically challenged) engenders a wrong in the other as its other, such that the material reality of the former has an ideality to negate such that absolute knowledge emerges in the figure of the subject who set it all up.

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143 Bosteels 2011, p. 42. It is a strange, conceited claim to make that mathematical ignorance is a sign of positive knowledge of literature, psychoanalysis and politics and, concomitantly, that mathematical knowledge precludes one from knowledge of these. The cliché of it all is embarrassing and in no small measure an insult to the history of thought.

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Freeing Althusser from Spinoza: A Reconsideration of Structural Causality

Ed Pluth

ABSTRACT:

The concept of structural causality, associated with the work of Louis Althusser, was, one can say, short-lived: even its foremost advocates seemed to drop it just about as quickly as they picked it up, while other concepts in Althusser's work continued to be popular. This paper proposes to discuss both the problems with and the merits of the concept, calling particular attention to the philosophical work it was supposed to do, which was both critical and constructive, negative and positive. Critical and negative in that it offered a way to avoid both a naturalistic mechanism and a Hegelian expressivism. In other words, it aimed to avoid both a naïve materialism and a naïve idealism. Constructive and positive, in that it was contributing to a new picture of the relationship between structure and what is structured, by trying to give an account of the manner in which structure was present and “in the real”: and, I will add, thereby providing the groundwork for a better version of dialectical materialism. There is no doubt that Spinoza's philosophy provided Althusser with the model for thinking of this form of causality. But the use of Spinoza as a model can also be identified as the source of many of the problems with the concept. An essay by Warren Montag dealing with an exchange between Althusser and Pierre Macherey will serve as the basis for my discussion of Spinoza and structural causality.

Keywords:

Althusser, Hegel, Macherey, Montag, Spinoza, structural causality.

“Thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy” (Hegel 1994, p. 257)

“But if Spinoza is called an atheist for the sole reason that he does not distinguish God from the world, it is a misuse of the term. Spinozism might really just as well or even better have been termed ACOSMISM... Spinoza maintains that there is no such thing as what is known as the world; it is merely a form of God, and in and for itself it is nothing. The world has no true reality, and all this that we know as the world has been cast into the abyss of the one identity. There is therefore no such thing as finite reality, it has no truth whatever” (Hegel 1994, p. 281)

In so many ways, for so many reasons, Spinoza seems to be a philosopher who is preferable to Hegel – non-totalitarian, radically democratic, a seemingly communist, horizontal ontology... So why try to free Althusser from Spinoza? In 1979 Pierre Macherey asked, intentionally messing with the chronology, “Hegel or Spinoza”? His answer, of course, was “Spinoza,” and his reason for putting Spinoza *after* Hegel was to suggest that Spinoza had been capable of reading Hegel in a certain sense, and was in fact a better reader of Hegel than Hegel had been of Spinoza. At the end of his book, he claims that the choice for Spinoza is made, not without some reservations, in the expectation that Spinoza’s work would aid in the development of a non-Hegelian dialectic, one that would avoid, among other things, what Macherey called the “evolutionism” of Hegel’s. I will assume this criticism of Hegel is familiar enough. Also, Spinoza’s work could, it was hoped, serve as a better basis for materialism. Yet it is fair to say that the jury is still out on all this.

There are some obvious reasons why a Spinozistic model is problematic for any project that wishes to continue with both materialism and dialectics. Such necessary conceptual tools as time, change, negation...these all have a shaky status in Spinoza’s philosophy – or, strictly speaking, on the Hegelian interpretation of Spinoza at least, they have no status at all. Then there is the theism. This is why Hegel called Spinoza’s philosophy an ACOSMISM. The God-drunk philosopher was certainly no atheist: what he did deny, Hegel argued, was the reality of the world itself. By denying the reality of time, the reality of human experience itself is called into question. Thus, “the world,” such as we know it and experience it, it can be fairly argued, *does not exist*, Spinoza’s philosophy must hold. Macherey does not ever really address this aspect of Hegel’s criticism. Perhaps that is because the denunciation of the apparent world in Spinoza actually goes quite well with the Althusserian critique of ideology and its embrace of science as a radical break with the empirical. Isn’t something like Spinoza’s acosmism entirely appropriate as a model for a wide range of contemporary approaches to human experience, from psychoanalysis to Marxism, all of which are suspicious of what is merely apparent and seemingly obvious?

My reconsideration of the question “Hegel or Spinoza” here is in large part driven by concerns about acosmism. Freeing Althusser from Spinoza, I am arguing, means freeing Althusser from Spinozistic “acosmism”. And this, I believe, brings his work closer to Hegel than to

Spinoza, since it will lead to a different way of evaluating the relationship between the apparent and the real. The way to get at this is through a reconsideration of structural causality.

The foremost criticisms of the concept of structural causality target its fatal circularity. As Ted Benton argued, the concept seems to do either too little or too much: it cannot do much to help us to understand specific causal relations among elements of an event or a totality– and so it is essentially useless as far as political and critical practice goes. And if structural causality is about the causality of something like a totality itself, then it makes structure way too strong, external, and transcendent – yet again making the concept theoretically uninteresting, tautological, and as far as practice goes, even debilitating (Benton 1984, pp. 64-5). On this view, the Spinozism that inspired structural causality would make the concept a bit too God-drunk.

Such objections to structural causality seem to follow a Popperian line of attack, and this seems to be the consensus view of its problems. What Gregory Elliot calls Althusser’s “rationalist epistemology” is described by him as “untenable – condemned by an internalism which insulated theoretical discourse from empirical evidence and severs it from its real referent” (Elliot 1987, p. 329). Since there is nothing that could count as a refutation of the theory of structural causality, this account goes, the concept cannot really be considered to do all that much. What is philosophical and rationalist about it, which Elliot calls its “internalism,” dooms it to the status of a pseudo-science.

For a similar conclusion in slightly different terms, we can also turn to Jacques Rancière, who, in an interview about the *Cahiers* project, was asked by Peter Hallward:

And this idea of structural causality, central to analysis of the ‘*action* of the structure’ (to use the *Cahiers*’ phrase)...could it have, in principle, served as mediation between theory and practice, once all reference to consciousness, to the subject, to militant will, etc. was removed? And this way, through the analysis of causality, it would be possible not only to study history but to understand how to make history. (Rancière 2012, p. 269)

To which Rancière replied:

Yes, certainly, it allowed for a kind of double attitude. First one could say, here we are presenting theory, as far as can be from any thought of engagement, of lived experience; this theory refutes false ideas, idealist ideas about the relation between theory and practice. But

one could also hope that theoretical practice itself might open up other fields for new ways of thinking about political practice... In fact it didn't open any such fields. (p. 269)

And although Rancière does not in this interview go into specific reasons for why the concept did not open up ways for thinking about the links between theory and practice, one can easily imagine that the circularity problem would be a major one.

But it is Jean-Claude Milner, interviewed by Knox Peden in the same volume, who refers explicitly to what he thinks was the lamentable absence of Popper for those working in France during this period. Now that Popper's line of questioning is better known in France, Milner observes that "the will to pose questions on the productive character of a structure, all these kinds of questions no longer command attention. I even feel that the general mode of questioning which was that of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* is a mode of questioning that has become very distant" – and the concept of structural causality was of course a crucial one for the *Cahiers* (Milner 2012, p. 242). Milner's verdict is that the works of Althusser "would fall apart" if submitted to the kind of reading he gave to Lacan in his own *L'oeuvre claire*. This is no doubt, again, because of the circular problem theories of "productive structures" have. For, what could count as a refutation of structural causality?

What I describe as the critical, negative force of the concept is still I think fairly easy to appreciate and does not really need much of a defense, as I hope the following discussion will make clear. What it is opposed to is what many thinkers are still opposed to. My reconsideration here wishes to go further, of course, by rehabilitating the constructive work the concept does, a work that needs to be understood in the correct way. I will argue that it needs to be defended and appreciated primarily as a *philosophical, theoretical* point, or as a *philosophical* creation. Against the typical criticisms, I argue that the concept of structural causality is bound to be misunderstood and misrepresented if it is taken in confirmationist, verificationist, or empiricist directions; and, thus, it is misunderstood if objections to it on such bases are taken seriously. It is, instead, a concept that primarily serves to provide a *framework* for more empirical sorts of research (with their own criteria for validity), and as such it should not be expected to give much on its own in the way of specific information about any particular system or structure one wishes to study in the first place. In other words, I am agreeing that the concept of structural causality itself will never have much to say about the specifics of any

model, time, space, or structure to which it is applied – such as, most notably, the capitalist mode of production, its origins, its conditions, its future. A theory of structural causality on its own will not tell us much about the particulars of the social movements, transformations, etc. that are associated with that mode of production's appearance. Yet, philosophically speaking, the concept continues to do much more than it seems at first blush.

It seems that no discussion of structural causality can get started without turning to how Althusser himself developed it as an alternative to other views of causality, called mechanism and expressivism. This may be familiar territory, so my discussion here will try to link these two views, or models, to some contemporary theoretical (and anti-theoretical) positions that should help to shed light on why I think the philosophical insight associated with the concept of structural causality is still important today.

According to the mechanistic or linear model of causality, any given thing or event, considered as an effect, is generally thought to be caused by something external to it and materially distinct from it. On this model, one may posit a multitude of elements, some with more force than others, some able to bring about a greater number of effects than others, influencing other elements in the space or domain being considered to greater and lesser degrees. One thing to observe right away about this model of causality is how it contains an almost inevitable reductionistic tendency: and with this point we can already see one of the philosophical errors the concept of structural causality was designed to avoid. In Althusser's work the mechanism, and reductionism, to be critiqued and avoided would have been found especially in the sort of economism present in some variants of Marxism.

While some type of mechanical causality may be necessary in the natural science (along with its reductionism...and is this model really changed at all by quantum physics?), it does not seem to work as well in the social or human sciences. One would expect regularities and laws to emerge from a mechanistic model of causality. Yet these seem to be totally absent from social and historical phenomena. Obviously, classes do not always act in their objective economic interests! Obviously, decreases in wages do not automatically cause strikes, revolts, etc., or even any increase in militancy and discontent... Strategically, politically, and rhetorically, however, one can see the appeal of this model for

social scientists and political militants: it would allow for the claim that capitalism's demise is etched into the very nature of capitalism as a mode of production itself...provided the nature of capitalism as a social, economic, political "cause" is understood a certain way.

And there's the rub. Within this model, how can something like capitalism be thought of as a cause at all? One could think of capitalism as a sort of cause that is in principle independent of its effects, but this would seem to suggest some sort of Platonism. Capitalism is what it is. It emerges at certain times, and will (possibly, inevitably?) fade away at others...In other words, its causal power may be seen to ebb and flow, and there may be periods in which it is operating better than others – more effectively within a totality, for example. It is interesting that Marxists as well as Libertarians, Neo-Liberals, Neo-Classicists, etc. may be said to flirt with such a crypto-Platonist understanding of capitalism. Empirical failures of capitalism may be thought to be due to its impure incarnations. Capitalism, for example, may be too constrained by State mechanisms that are alien to it and hampering its growth. Hence one can equally well, within this model, advocate for a more pure capitalism, a better incarnation of it.

But far more common is another option or variant consistent with mechanistic causality; one that seems to destroy the thing itself, capitalism, by atomizing it into nothingness. This is an anti-theoretical hyper-empiricism or eclecticism. This variant thinks of capitalism not as some kind of essence, but as a swarming multiplicity of events and effects. The more causes for whatever effect or event is being studied that one can incorporate into one's story the better, and more accurate, the story is. And for this reason this variant within mechanical causality always in fact says too little – for there is always more that can be said, more effects to consider, more causes to posit: the French Revolution from the point of view of x, y, z...

Some version of this hyper-empiricism is probably the most widespread view among historians and social scientists today. Far more threatening to such disciplines than the claim that there is no truth is this, their own ingrained postmodern eclecticism, according to which the best a scholar can do is take into account as many different causes of an event as she can. Thus it can readily be admitted that it is impossible to give a total picture of all the causes of capitalism, the French Revolution, or the Civil War...What one can be sure of, in fact, is that there is never any one cause of anything, and certainly no one true story (except the total story that one could give, *per impossibile*, if one had

access to all the facts, and all the causes...). In this way, even when they wish to avoid postmodern relativism, such scholars have a rather empty notion of truth: truth is the inaccessible totality of facts. Hence, with respect to something like capitalism as a distinct mode of production, it is easy for advocates of this variant within mechanical causality to become nominalists since they are not willing to become Platonists. Much better to argue that there is no such thing as capitalism, strictly speaking, and to see it instead as a sometimes useful, sometimes misleading, theoretical abstraction. Or, one can go the Margaret Thatcher route and claim, as she did about society, that it just does not exist! There is no such thing. Or, if you prefer (as libertarians and neo-liberals also seem to in the case of capitalism)...it has ALWAYS existed, a little bit, insofar as some people have always pursued profit and trade. Then, capitalism becomes naturalized: it becomes equivalent to exchange. The ways in which exchange occurs change (different tools, different relationships, etc.)...and all this is simply the history of capitalism.

One of the main virtues of structural causality is that it is fairly easily able to avoid these unpleasant variants contained within mechanical causality. And on my reading, structural causality in fact will always have an easier time avoiding mechanical causality than it will have avoiding the next model of causality to consider, expressive causality. This is directly due, we shall see, to the Spinozist inspiration for structural causality.

We can think of mechanical causality as a sort of externalism, in which any given thing or phenomenon, considered as an effect, is caused by something other to it. By contrast, then, it is helpful to think of expressive causality as a model that corrects externalism with a kind of internalism. Effects are seen in this case not as external to their causes and thus distinct from them, but as expressions of their causes instead. One can easily see how such a model would allow for the existence of something like capitalism as a distinct mode of production, while avoiding both the transcendent, idealist Platonism and the hyper-empiricist atomism that mechanism encourages. For in this model causes present themselves, at least a bit, in what they bring about. They are in the real, a real presence. And it is on the question of the distinctness, or not, of causes (or essences, it is easy to see now) from their effects that different variants open up within expressive causality.

Of course, Hegel is in many ways the paradigm for this type of

causality in Althusser's discussions of it. Consider here the clichéd and ridiculous criticism of Hegel: that he could deduce the necessity of everything from the same simple system, even the existence of the keyboard I am using. But some strands of contemporary theory can be read as variants of this view. To mention just one that is relevant today: expressive causality seems to be present in paranoid and totalizing histories. Consider Foucauldian micropower, which is seen to radically permeate the social space and manners of behavior... Consider also Judith Butler's performative theory of gender identity, in which it is never clear when or if we are ever *not* performing gender. The performance of gender seems to accompany all other acts a person can possibly engage in. From this perspective, expressive causality is always able to explain *too much*, while also always saying really nothing at all, since it is always saying the same thing.

Here is how Althusser recaps these two models, as he transitions into his discussion of Marx's discovery of structural causality (the word "effectivity" in this passage is referring to the manner of presence of a cause, or a whole, or a structure):

Very schematically, we can say that classical philosophy...had two and only two systems of concepts with which to think effectivity. The mechanistic system, Cartesian in origin, which reduced causality to a *transitive* and analytical effectivity: it could not be made to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements, except at the cost of extra-ordinary distortions (such as those in Descartes' 'psychology' and biology). But a second system was available, one conceived precisely in order to deal with the effectivity of a whole on its elements: the Leibnizian concept of *expression*. This is the model that dominates all Hegel's thought. But it presupposes in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an *inner essence*, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole, such that at each moment it is possible to write the immediately adequate equation: *such and such an element* (economic, political, legal, literary, religious, etc., in Hegel) = *the inner essence of the whole*. Here was a model which made it possible to think the effectivity of the whole on each of its elements, but if this category – inner essence/outer phenomenon – was to be applicable everywhere and at every moment to each of the phenomena arising in the totality in question, *it presupposed that the whole had a certain nature, precisely the nature of a 'spiritual' whole in which each element was expressive of the entire totality as a 'pars totalis'*. In other words, Leibniz and Hegel

did have a category for the effectivity of the whole on its elements or parts, but on the absolute condition that the whole was not a structure. (Althusser 1970, p. 186-7)

What Althusser is actually describing here is what unifies the two models of causality discussed so far: a traditional philosophical conception of a whole in terms of a homogenous unity. The natural sciences posit this for nature, and Hegelianism posits this for Absolute Spirit (as Nietzsche posits this for the will to power, etc.): these are wholes in which one and the same set of rules and conditions applies. While such notions of a whole can certainly, Althusser claims, think of "the effectivity of the whole on its elements or parts" they fail to think of the whole as a structure, he adds. So the question is, what does thinking of the whole as a structure, rather than as anything else (a unified totality? an essence?) do? Why is this important?

Beyond externalism and internalism, mechanism and expressionism, thinking of a whole as a structure is supposed to open up a different way of thinking about the relation between causes and their effects, as well as to give us a different vision of the presence and status of a cause itself. Thus, the concept of structural causality was developed by Althusser in order to be able to explain better the real presence of something like capitalism as a distinct mode of production in diverse economic situations – situations, always, in which capitalism is also seen to have not fully saturated the field within which it operates; and thus, situations that in some way exceed the cause in question, and are not entirely permeated and affected by it. In this way, what Althusser is proposing is a conception of a whole or totality that differs from the classical philosophical one. This is why notions like overdetermination, domination, determination in the final instance, etc., would be associated with the concept of structural causality: a structural cause may be seen to dominate and determine its situation, although it never functions as a TOTAL cause for all the effects/events in a situation. In this way it differs from an expressive cause, which, on the (bad) Hegelian model, is one that does permeate the whole; and it differs from a mechanical cause, the conditions for which are universally applicable to the situation in which it occurs. As Althusser describes it:

If the whole is posed as *structured*, i.e., as possessing a type of unity quite different from the type of unity of the spiritual whole... not only does it become impossible to think the determination of the elements by the structure in the categories of analytical and transitive causality, *it also becomes impossible to think it in the category of the global*

expressive causality of a universal inner essence immanent in its phenomenon. The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances. (Althusser 1970, p. 187)

And the next lines of this passage are where Althusser claims that it was Spinoza who signals the way out of this theoretical embarrassment.

Notice the description of expressive causality here in terms of immanence: it posits a totality, a whole, whose “inner essence” is “immanent in its phenomenon”. This suggests that structural causality, by contrast, is not going to lean exclusively on the notion that a structure is immanent in its effects either. But if it is not immanent is it transcendent, as well as being transcendental? That is, is a structural cause not only present in its effects but must it not also be in some sense *other* to them? Can it be a condition of possibility for its effects (which it must be, if we are to continue to think of it as a cause at all) without also somehow being *beyond* its effects?

This line of questioning is the focal point of Warren Montag’s brilliant essay on a debate between Pierre Macherey (who would later author, of course, *Hegel or Spinoza?*) and Althusser, which is a chapter entitled “Between Spinozists” in *Althusser and His Contemporaries* – the entire book is a must-read for anyone interested in these matters. Macherey, in a letter to Althusser in 1965, after reading the then still unpublished manuscript of *Reading Capital*, and himself still committed to the notion of structure and a certain structuralism, expressed concerns about the very presence of the notion of a “structured whole” in Althusser’s work. The issue was this: for Macherey “the idea of the whole is really the spiritualist conception of structure” (Montag 2013, p. 74). In other words, Macherey felt that retaining the notion of a whole, at all, rendered problematic the very distinction Althusser was struggling to articulate between structural causality and expressive causality; the latter, as we saw above, being linked by Althusser himself to a “spiritual” (i.e., Hegelian) notion of structure. What was at stake in Macherey’s point, as Althusser himself articulated it in his written reply to Macherey, was the difference between positing a “latent” structure vs. positing one that is, in Althusser’s own words, an “absent exteriority” (Montag 2013, p. 75-6). Relying on a notion of latent structure would of course bring up the hermeneutic problems that Althusser was keen to avoid throughout *Reading Capital*, and such a notion is not all that different from a key aspect of expressive causality itself. As Montag puts it, this would be

a “theory according to which the meaning of a text is expressed in all its parts, each of which in turn is read insofar as it is reduced to the meaning that pervades the whole” (Montag 2013, p. 81). The direction Althusser wanted to go, no doubt, was toward the notion of structure as, not latent, but an “absent exteriority” then. Althusser therefore seems comfortable with hanging on to a notion of structure that is in some sense distinct from what it structures. Freeing Althusser from Spinoza is very much about how to make such a move, for, as we shall see, his Spinozism ultimately obscures it.

As is well known, Spinoza can be read as both an atheist and a pantheist. In one and the same passage from *Reading Capital*, Montag observes that, discussing the manner in which structure is supposed to be present (and not latent) in the real, “Althusser will employ the formulae ‘present in its effects’ and ‘exists in its effects’ as if they are synonymous, while in fact they constitute the two opposing directions that readings of Spinoza have taken, the pantheist and the atheist” (Montag 2013, p. 90). At first blush, this may be making a mountain out of a molehill: there hardly seems to be any difference between saying that a structure or cause is *present in* its effects versus saying it *exists in* its effects. If the point is to avoid a notion of *latent* structure, it would seem that either formulation would work fine. However, there are very different implications to each, as Montag keenly observes. If a structure is merely “present in” its effects, this suggests that structure may well be present elsewhere – a structure present in its effects is not necessarily exhausted by its effects. Thus, it may be “present in” as well as “absent from”. Such a structure would be, in principle, transcendent to what it is present in. And if it is transcendent to what it is present in, it is not all that different from the expressivist notion of a latent structure – this is chief among Montag’s, and Macherey’s, concerns.

Montag’s idea is that if, as Althusser also put it, structure is said instead to “exist in its effects,” then this would amount to going with a more radically “atheistic” conception of it: for the implication is that that’s all there is to it; structure is only there in them and nowhere else. Hence going more in the direction of Spinoza than Hegel, in this context, means less transcendence and more immanence. More Spinoza, according to Macherey and Montag, means saying not that structure is somehow magically “present in” its effects...but that it just *is in* them, full stop. The god is in the statue, but not only there, in this one statue, but elsewhere as well...in other places and phenomena *at the same time*...

and yet nowhere else.

But is this view – let's call it radical immanence – a sufficiently atheistic Spinozism? I suggest that Althusser's own notion of an "absent exteriority" would go even farther in this direction, even if it risks repeating the problems found in a notion of latent structure. As Montag himself notes, Althusser did wish to avoid "any reading of overdetermination as chance or indeterminate and therefore unknowable disorder" (Montag 2013, p. 96). The point, I take it, is that Althusser was concerned that there would be an insufficient difference between a doctrine that would uphold the radical immanence of structure and the hyper-empiricism of mechanistic causality. What Montag identifies as the atheist reading of Spinoza amounts to holding that a structure *just is* in its effects. And if that is the case...then there is nothing, strictly speaking, but effects.

Let's agree that Althusser too had to avoid any notion of a latent structure in order not to fall in to expressivism. And so he had to go in the direction of Spinoza to work his way out of this particular version of Hegelian philosophy. But, as Montag points out, Althusser also felt like he had to avoid the doctrine of radical immanence (the atheist, not pantheist, Spinoza, as Montag would have it), since this would have been hyper-empiricist in its own way: it would have been, as Montag describes it, "a lapse into a 'pluralism' and 'hyper-empiricism,' according to which Marxism is nothing more than the observation of innumerable indifferent and indeterminate factors, to cite the critique of Althusser's comrade Gilbert Mury" (Montag 2013, p. 93). Here we see the difficult position the concept of structural causality is in, caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of mechanistic empiricism and spiritualist expressivism, seeking what seems to be an impossible middle ground between them. Montag wishes to place an atheist interpretation of Spinoza in that middle ground, not appreciating sufficiently that the radical immanence of structure makes it hardly discernible from the pluralism and hyper-empiricism of mechanistic causality that are also to be avoided.

Rather than seeing Althusser's use of both "present in" and "exists in" as an inconsistency or hesitation that could be settled by going in the direction of a more atheistic reading of Spinoza, we should take the use of both phrases to signal the way toward a key positive insight. One must be able to say both at the same time – present in and exists in – if one is to think of structure as an "absent exteriority". This does risk positing structure as a latent structure, but that risk is

ultimately avoided by marking the structure's exteriority as "absent". This should be taken to mean not that a structure is absent from what it effects, in the sense that it is beyond, but rather that its very exteriority is itself an absent, voided out one. So that if there is a Spinozism here, it is not one in which there is a superabundant substance/cause/structure, but instead a hollowed-out one: a void placed there where there was God or Nature. One could argue (as Zizek and others have, of course) that this is the way to understand Hegel.

But what is this really doing? How is marking structural cause as an "absent exteriority" not making structure into nothing at all? One of the keys to Althusser's philosophy of course is the distinction between real objects and conceptual, theoretical objects. Claiming that a structural cause is an "absent exteriority" is another way of saying that structure is a conceptual object, and not a real object. What does that mean? Conceptual objects are not identical to real objects (the concept of sugar is not sweet), but they are not merely fake or unreal for all that either. Similarly, Althusser's view that structures are an absent exteriority avoids simply identifying structures with what they are structuring, while also avoiding seeing them as *mere* "constructs" – since they are, after all, identified as causes...just as one should not assert that the conceptual objects of the natural sciences are merely constructed since they are not identical to the objects of the senses. Such objects are indeed *produced* by a theoretical labor and leap, and yet this does not take away from their real efficacy. Structural causes are to be thought of in a similar manner, and reducing them to the immanent obscures this.

If one problem with Spinozism is its proximity to an atheoretical pluralism – the "atheist" Spinozism, which would seem to reduce a cause or structure to its effects – another problem with it is its derealization of the apparent. This is what Hegel called Spinoza's acosmism, and, as I mentioned earlier, it does not seem to be of concern to Macherey and Montag.

It is certainly the case that in order to get a grip on the true nature of the real some kind of parallax view is required, as Zizek has long argued: some way of looking awry, some theoretical break is needed in order to get a grasp on what is really there. The distinction between ideology and science is still entirely relevant. But it is also a mistake to take this to mean that the apparent is false and unreal...which is another problem with what going too far in a Spinozist direction does.

A Hegelian thesis that is helpful in this context is articulated in the *Logic*: it is of the essence of essence to appear. Modified for our purposes, this would mean that a structural cause *is not without its effects*. This is a thesis, I suggest, that cannot be maintained within a Spinozist framework, and is one of the reasons why Hegel rightly accused Spinoza of acosmism, not atheism.

What does acosmism mean? Literally, of course, it means that the cosmos does not exist – a ridiculous point to make about Spinoza, it would seem. But given the irreality of time and finitude in Spinoza, is it not possible to take Spinoza to be saying just this? Even someone as otherwise sympathetic to Spinoza as Deleuze noted this very point. For Spinoza, he wrote,

there still remains a difference between substance and the modes: Spinoza's substance appears independent of the modes, while the modes are dependent on substance, but as though on something other than themselves. Substance must itself be said *of* the modes and only *of* the modes. Such a condition can be satisfied only at the price of a more general categorical reversal according to which being is said of becoming, identity of that which is different, the one of the multiple, etc. (Deleuze 1994, p. 40)

What else is this saying other than that the modes are *irreal*? And is this not to agree with Hegel's charge of acosmism?

Structural causality upholds the status of structure as a real presence. But it should also be taken to mean that the presence of structure *is in the apparent*, without any hint of a de-realization of the apparent – which is a needless and unjustified move, as the distinction between conceptual and real objects shows us. What this allows for is the thesis that something of the apparent is able to overrun its conditions. Thus, only some aspects of the apparent are effects of the cause – not the whole of the apparent. A structural cause is thus not fully determining of a situation, and this is just what the notion of determination in the last instance is supposed to be getting at. There may well be a dominant shape to a given domain, but there is always more in the domain than what is causing its particular, dominant shape. An acosmism couldn't strictly speaking allow for this: for the apparent must be real for this kind of "downward causation" (or upward?) to be the case.

Thus, structural causality lets one hang on to the apparent and preserve the appearances, thereby avoiding the philosophical errors of reductionism and de-realization...while also giving us a purchase on

a truth and a real that are not self-evident (that are not, in Althusser's terminology, ideological), by means of the creation of conceptual objects. Can't we read Hegel as an inversion of Spinozism, wherein we see a much-needed now *promotion* of what otherwise appears to be derived and merely apparent (thinking, culture, etc.)? And where in the place of God/substance/Nature, we have an (active, efficacious) void/cause? What Montag describes as the incomplete project of Althusser's philosophy seems to lie more in this Hegelian direction than in the direction of Spinoza.

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Hegel or Spinoza: Substance, Subject, and Critical Marxism

Ted Stolze

ABSTRACT:

Slavoj Žižek has revived and reaffirmed Hegel's critique of Spinoza, namely, that the latter's conception of substance fails to offer an adequate account of subjectivity. Following Pierre Macherey and Michel Foucault, though, I challenge Žižek's perspective by showing that Spinoza proposed an alternative view of the self that turns out to be more useful than Hegel's for the development of a critical Marxism.

Keywords:

Slavoj Žižek, Pierre Macherey, Hegel's critique of Spinoza, Marxist reception of Spinoza, Marxist theories of subjectivity, Marxist philosophy

Slavoj Žižek has wondered if it is possible *not* to love Spinoza. Indeed, he asks, “Who can be against a lone Jew who, on top of it, was excommunicated by the ‘official’ Jewish community itself? One of the most touching expressions of this love is how one often attributes to him almost divine capacities—like Pierre Macherey, who, in his otherwise admirable *Hegel ou Spinoza* (arguing against the Hegelian critique of Spinoza), claims that one cannot avoid the impression that Spinoza had already read Hegel and, in advance, answered his reproaches.”¹ Although Žižek is badly mistaken about Macherey's objective in his book and related articles,² one cannot avoid the impression that a century ago Lenin had already read Žižek and, in advance, answered the latter's numerous reproaches against the contemporary Marxist turn to Spinoza.

Buried in Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* are his excerpts from Vladimir Mikhailovich Shulyatnikov's 1908 book, *The Justification of Capitalism in Western European Philosophy*.³ In what evidently passed at the time for a serious Marxist history of philosophy Shulyatnikov had contended that

[W]hen Spinoza died, as is well known, the fine fleur of the Dutch bourgeoisie with great pomp accompanied the hearse that carried his

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¹ Žižek 2004, p. 33.

² See Macherey 1992 and 1998.

³ Lenin 1972, pp. 486-502.

remains. And if we become more closely acquainted with his circle of acquaintances and correspondents, we again meet with the fine fleur of the bourgeoisie—and not only of Holland but of the entire world.... The bourgeoisie revered Spinoza, their bard. Spinoza's conception of the world is the song of triumphant capital, of all-consuming, all-centralising capital. There is no being, there are no things, apart from the single substance; there can be no existence for producers apart from the large-scale manufacturing enterprise...."

To Shulyavtovich's self-assured conclusion that "Spinoza's conception of the world is the song of triumphant capital, of all-consuming, all-centralising capital," Lenin caustically replied with a single word in the margin of his notebook: "infantile."⁴ It was as if Lenin were rebuking in advance Žižek's crass remark that Spinoza embodies "the ideology of late capitalism!"⁵ How can Marxists avoid the false dilemma of either loving Spinoza, or hating him? Perhaps by trying to understand Spinoza, by reading him carefully and responsibly—and by critically appropriating some of his concepts.⁶

Žižek and Badiou against Spinoza

In several dense pages of his monumental new book *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*,⁷ Žižek has refined his earlier criticisms of the Marxist appropriation of Spinoza by seeking to identify the "precise point" at which he thinks "the contrast between Hegel and Spinoza appears at its "purest." Žižek begins with his own Lacanian variation on Hegel's famous complaint: "Spinoza's Absolute is a Substance which 'expresses' itself in its attributes and modes without the subjectivizing *point de capiton* [quilting point]."⁸ Žižek then addresses the limitations of what he takes to be Spinoza's "famous proposition" that *omnis determinatio est negatio* ("all determination is negation"), which "may sound Hegelian" but is in fact "anti-Hegelian," despite two possible ways to understand what is negated, and how. If, on the one hand, negation "refers to the Absolute itself, it makes

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⁴ Lenin 1972, p. 493. For a brief commentary, see Kline 1952, p. 21.

⁵ Žižek 1993, pp. 216-19.

⁶ Quotations from Spinoza's writings are based on, but often modify, Samuel Shirley's translations (Spinoza 2002).

⁷ Žižek 2012.

⁸ Žižek 2012, p. 367.

a negative-theological point: every positive determination of the Absolute, every predicate we attribute to it, is inadequate, fails to grasp its essence and thus already negates it"; if, on the other hand, "it refers to particular empirical things, it makes a point about their transient nature: every entity delimited from others by a particular determination will sooner or later join the chaotic abyss out of which it arose, for every particular determination is a negation not only in the sense that it will involve the negation of other particular determinations . . . but in a more radical sense that it refers to its long-term instability."⁹

Žižek reconstructs a Hegelian criticism of these two possible interpretations of negation as follows: "the Absolute is not a positive entity persisting in its impermeable identity beyond the transient world of finite things; the only true Absolute is nothing but this very process of the rising and passing away of all particular things." But, Žižek continues, this would mean that, according to Hegel, Spinoza's philosophy resembles "a pseudo-Oriental Heraclitean wisdom concerning the eternal flow of the generation and corruption of all things under the sun—in more philosophical terms, such a vision relies on the univocity of being."¹⁰

Žižek allows that one could defend Spinoza along the lines of what Althusser called "aleatory materialism" by claiming that Substance "is not simply the eternal generative process which continues without any interruption or cut, but that it is, on the contrary, the universalization of a cut or fall (*clinamen*): Substance is nothing but the constant process of "falling" (into determinate/particular entities); everything there is, is a fall. . . . There is no Substance which falls, curves, interrupts the flow, etc.; substance simply *is* the infinitely productive capacity of such falls/cuts/interruptions, they are its only reality." According to such an aleatory materialist defense of Spinoza, "Substance and *clinamen* (the curvature of the Substance which generates determinate entities)" would "directly coincide; in this ultimate speculative identity, Substance is nothing but the process of its own 'fall,' the negativity that pushes towards productive determination. . . ."¹¹

Not surprisingly, Žižek rejects this move because, he contends, it would simply "renormalize" the *clinamen* and, as a result, turn it "into

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⁹ Žižek 2012, pp. 367-68.

¹⁰ Žižek 2012, p. 368.

¹¹ Žižek 2012, p. 368.

its opposite,” for “if all that there is are interruptions or falls, then the key aspect of surprise, of the intrusion of an unexpected contingency, is lost, and we find ourselves in a boring, flat universe whose contingency is totally predictable and necessary.”¹² Žižek seeks, then, not to “radicalize” Spinoza by conceiving of substance as “nothing but the process of *clinamen*,” for in such a case, he contends, “Substance remains One, a Cause immanent to its effects.” Instead, along Hegelian-Lacanian lines he seeks to “take a step further” and “reverse the relationship: there is no Substance, only the Real as the absolute gap, non-identity, and particular phenomena (modes) are Ones, so many attempts to stabilize this gap.”¹³

Žižek then sums up what he regards as the stark contrast between Spinoza and Hegel:

In contrast to Spinoza, for whom there is no Master-Signifier enacting a cut, marking a conclusion, “dotting the *it*,” but just a continuous chain of causes, the Hegelian dialectical process involves cuts, sudden interruption of the continuous flow, reversals which retroactively restructure the entire field. In order to properly understand this relationship between a continual process and its cuts or ends, we should ignore the stupid notion of a “contradiction” in Hegel’s thought between method (endless process) and system (end); it is also not sufficient to conceive cuts as moment within an encompassing process, internal differences which arise and disappear.¹⁴

Žižek concludes with “a parallel with the flow of speech.” Just as “the flow of speech cannot go on indefinitely,” there has to be a something like “the point that concludes a sentence,” for “it is only the dot at the end that retroactively fixes or determines the meaning of the sentence.” And yet, he adds, this dot cannot be “a simple fixation which removes all risk, abolishing all ambiguity and openness.” Rather, “the dotting itself, its cut . . . releases—sets free—meaning and interpretation: the dot always occurs contingently, as a surprise, it generates a surplus—why *here*? What does this mean?”¹⁵

How should one respond to Žižek’s identification of the “precise point” at which Hegel’s philosophy diverges from Spinoza’s? To

12 Žižek 2012, pp. 368–69.

13 Žižek 2012, p. 377.

14 Žižek 2012, pp. 369.

15 Žižek 2012, p. 369.

begin with, it is astonishing that in Žižek’s 1000-page work on Hegel there is not a single reference to Macherey. Although as of 2004 Žižek had clearly read *Hegel ou Spinoza*¹⁶ (when *Organs without Bodies* was published¹⁷), his engagement with Macherey’s book had lapsed by 2012.

As a result, Žižek’s treatment of Spinoza’s phrase *omnis determinatio est negatio* turns out to be irrelevant, since, as Macherey already ably demonstrated in *Hegel or Spinoza*, not only did Spinoza never use this exact phrase, but Hegel misquoted him, took the sentence Spinoza did use *once* in a letter—not a published work—out of context, and then seriously misconstrued its meaning.¹⁸ Let us focus instead on Žižek’s contention that, unlike Hegel, Spinoza’s philosophy offers no way to grasp substance as subjectivity and so alternates between either “a pseudo-Oriental Heraclitean wisdom concerning the eternal flow of the generation and corruption of all things under the sun” or “a boring, flat universe whose contingency is totally predictable and necessary.” Neither is an appealing option, to say the least.

But Žižek is not alone in pitting Hegel against Spinoza with respect to the problem of substance that has not yet become subject. In *Logics of Worlds* Alain Badiou has likewise argued that Hegel’s great philosophical insight “can be summed up in three principles:

—The only truth is that of the Whole.

—The Whole is a self-unfolding, and not an absolute-unity external to the subject.

—The Whole is the immanent arrival of its own concept.”

This means, for Badiou, “that the thought of the Whole is the effectuation of the Whole itself. Consequently, what displays the Whole within thought is nothing other than the path of thinking, that is its method. Hegel is the methodical thinker of the Whole.”¹⁹ By contrast, Badiou contends, “Spinoza saw perfectly that every thought must presuppose the Whole as containing determinations in itself, by self-negation. But he failed to grasp the *subjective* absoluteness of the Whole, which alone guarantees integral immanence.”²⁰

Badiou’s own Hegelian accusation that Spinoza “failed to grasp

16 Now available in English translation as Macherey 2011.

17 Žižek 2004.

18 Macherey 2011, pp. 113–213. See also Melmed 2012.

19 Badiou 2009, p. 142.

20 Badiou 2009, p. 142.

the *subjective* absoluteness of the Whole” misses the mark, though. Spinoza called his major work *Ethics* for good reason: his overriding objective was how to understand and show how to attain individual and collective freedom and happiness—not to grasp the “subjective absoluteness of the Whole.” Indeed, in the opening lines of part 2 of the *Ethics* Spinoza warned that he was concerned not with the “infinitely many things” that necessarily follow “in infinitely many ways” from his conception of God as “eternal and infinite being” but only with what “can lead us as if by the hand to knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness.” As a result, Spinoza’s “metaphysics in the service of ethics”²¹ was less concerned with mereology—the study of parts and wholes²²—than, as Bernard Vandewalle has compellingly argued, with refashioning philosophical activity as a kind of “therapeutics of the body and mind” in both individual and transindividual respects.²³

To claim, then, as Badiou and Žižek have, that Spinoza failed to address the problem of subjectivity is to ignore the last four parts of the *Ethics* that concern the human mind, its relationship to the body and the external world, the nature of affects and their power, and the extent to which reason can moderate, stabilize, redirect, or transform passive into active affects in pursuit of individual and collective freedom. Since Žižek and Badiou offer only the barest of textual support for their criticisms of Spinoza, we should examine what the latter actually wrote about the nature of the self and consider what has caused Žižek and Badiou to miss, evade, or distort something important.

As Macherey has maintained, Hegel’s philosophical problematic hindered him from grasping what Spinoza actually wrote; for Hegel,

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21 To use A. W. Moore’s felicitous designation. See Moore 2012, pp. 44–66.

22 It is worth noting, however, that Spinoza did address the parts/whole relation in a letter to Henry Oldenberg, dated November 20, 1665, in which he proposed a famous and striking analogy between human beings “living in our part of nature” and a “tiny worm living in the blood.” Just as such a worm “would regard each individual particle of the blood as a whole, not a part...and... would have no idea as to how all the parts are controlled by the overall nature of the blood,” so too do human beings fail to grasp that “every body, in so far as it exists as modified in a definite way, must be considered as a part of the whole universe.” Moreover, just as the motion of blood itself is affected by external forces, and is only a part of a larger whole, so too the nature of the universe is “absolutely infinite” and “its parts are controlled by the nature of this infinite power [potentia] in infinite ways and are compelled to undergo infinite variations” (Ep 32).

23 Vandewalle 2011. Although Antonio Negri (1991, p. 262n.8) has been troubled that such talk of “therapeutics” miscasts Spinoza as an individualist under the influence of late-Renaissance, neo-Stoic, or Cartesian ideas, I agree with Vandewalle’s response that there is a political dimension in Spinoza’s philosophy specifically arising from “medical or physiological inspiration” (Vandewalle 2011, pp. 15n.1, 145–66).

Spinoza’s philosophy played “the role of an indicator or a mirror, on whose surface conceptions which are apparently the most foreign to his own by contrast trace their contours.”²⁴ It would appear that Spinoza’s philosophy continues to serve as a distorting mirror for Badiou and Žižek, who have engaged less frequently and less carefully with Spinoza’s text than did Hegel. But in order to see how this distortion has occurred, allow me to make a brief detour via two tantalizing references by Michel Foucault to Spinoza’s early work, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.

Hegelian subject or Spinozist self?

In *History of Madness* Foucault characterized Spinoza’s project in the *Treatise* as “a sort of ethical wager, which is won when it is discovered that the exercise of freedom is accomplished in the concrete fullness of reason, which, by its union with nature taken in its totality, is access to a higher form of nature The freedom of the wager culminates in a unity where it disappears as a choice to reappear as a necessity of reason.”²⁵

Commenting on Foucault, Macherey has observed that Spinoza developed “the idea according to which the individual has in itself no other reality than that communicated through its relation to the totality to which one can also say that it ‘belongs,’ a relation that governs its ethical destination.” Foucault clearly didn’t embrace Spinoza’s naturalism but set forth instead an idea of “historical belonging” that would be “irreducible to the universal laws of a nature considered in general.” Yet, according to Macherey, Foucault’s reading of Spinoza enables us to ponder the meaning of Spinoza’s “naturalism.” By “eternity of substance,” Spinoza did not have in mind

the permanence of a nature already given in itself, in an abstract and static manner, according to the idea of ‘substance which has not yet become subject’ developed by Hegel regarding Spinoza; but, to the extent that this substance is inseparable from its productivity, that it manifests itself nowhere else than in the totality of its modal realizations, in which it is absolutely immanent, it is a nature that is itself produced in a history, and under conditions that the latter necessarily attaches to it. Thus for the soul to attain the understanding of its union

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24 Macherey 1998, p. 25.

25 Foucault 2006, p. 140.

with the whole of nature is also to recognize historically what confers on it its own identity, and it is in a certain way, then, to respond to the question “Who am I now?”²⁶

Foucault equally allows us to see that Spinoza advocated an “ethics of freedom” that would not be “enclosed within the framework and categories of a moral speculation, itself developed in terms of subjection to a law, whether the latter acts from inside or outside the individual it directs.”²⁷

In one of his last series of lectures—those concerning the “Hermeneutics of the Subject”—Foucault returned to Spinoza’s *Treatise* and argued that “in formulating the problem of access to the truth Spinoza linked the problem to a series of requirements concerning the subject’s very being: In what aspects and how must I transform my being as subject? What conditions must I impose on my being as subject so as to have access to the truth, and to what extent will this access to the truth give me what I seek, that is to say the highest good, the sovereign good?”²⁸ Although Foucault rightly drew attention to Spinoza’s distinctive “practice of the self,” one must admit that this self is a peculiar one—at least from the standpoint of Hegel’s account of subjectivity—for after insisting that “true knowledge proceeds from cause to effect,” Spinoza noted that “this is the same as what the ancients said . . . except that so far as I know they never conceived the soul . . . as acting according to certain laws, like a spiritual automaton.”²⁹

Although Spinoza’s metaphor of a *spiritual automaton* may be philosophically unsettling, there need be nothing reductive or mechanistic about a composite self without a unified subject.³⁰ As Macherey has ably demonstrated, Spinoza’s point was simply that the “movement of thought proceeds from the same necessity as all reality,” and so the “absolutely natural character of the process must be mastered according to its own laws.”³¹ Indeed, in this respect

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26 Macherey 1998, p. 134.

27 Macherey 1998, p. 133.

28 Foucault 2005, p. 27. Foucault is concerned explicitly only with the first nine paragraphs of the *Treatise*, but I believe his observation applies equally to Spinoza’s project in the *Ethics*.

29 TdIE 85.

30 Indeed, Spinoza’s conception of the self anticipates the empirical results of contemporary neuroscience. See Hood 2012.

31 Macherey 2011, p. 59.

Spinoza anticipated Hegel, for “in establishing a necessary relationship between knowledge . . . and the process of its production, he permits it to grasp itself as absolute and thus to grasp the absolute. Taken outside this objective development, knowledge is nothing more than the formal representation of a reality for which it can provide only an abstract illusion.”³² Yet Spinoza’s position should not be confused with Hegel’s. By making thought an attribute of substance, Spinoza construed knowledge as an absolutely objective process without a subject and freed its internal causal movement from any teleological presupposition.³³

In sum, the soul operates as a *spiritual automaton* because it is “not subjugated to the free will of a subject whose autonomy would be to all extents and purposes fictive.”³⁴ Moreover, ideas are not images or passive representations of an external reality that they would more or less resemble. As Macherey compellingly argues, Spinoza rejected the Cartesian conception of ideas as “mute paintings on canvas”³⁵ and defended the perspective that all ideas are *acts* that “always affirm something in themselves, according to a modality that returns to their cause, that is, in the last instance the substance that expresses itself in them in the form of one of their attributes, thought.”³⁶ The upshot is that “there is no subject of knowledge, not even of truth beneath these truths, that prepares its form in advance, because the idea is true in itself—singularly, actively, affirmatively, in the absence of all extrinsic determinations that submit it to an order of things or the decrees of the creator.”³⁷

Not surprisingly, Spinoza’s perspective was unpalatable to Hegel, who cautioned in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that “if thinking stops with . . . substance, there is then no development, no life, no spirituality or activity. So we can say that with Spinozism everything goes into the abyss but nothing emerges from it.”³⁸ Hegel likewise

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32 Macherey 2011, p. 59.

33 Macherey 2011, p. 59.

34 Macherey 2011, p. 63.

35 E2p43s.

36 Macherey 2011, p. 63.

37 Macherey 2011, p. 63.

38 Hegel 2009, p. 122.

wrote in part three of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* that “as regards *Spinozism*, it is to be noted against it that in the judgement by which the mind constitutes itself as *I*, as free subjectivity in contrast to determinacy, the mind emerges from substance, and philosophy, when it makes this judgement the absolute determination of mind, emerges from Spinozism.”³⁹

Hegel’s point was that Spinoza could not adequately account for what is distinctive about subjectivity, namely, its full-fledged *emergence* from substance. As Terry Pinkard puts it, “the revolution in modern science was an essential part of the modern revolution in ‘spirit,’ in our grasp of what it means to be human, just as the revolution in spirit’s grasp of itself correspondingly called for a revolution in our theoretical stance to nature.” As a result, then, “to grasp the revolution in spirit required, so Hegel thought, grasping just what nature was so that it would become intelligible how it could be that spirit had to define itself as a self-instituted liberation from nature.”⁴⁰ From Hegel’s perspective, Spinoza’s conception of the mind remained mired in substance and could not attain genuinely free self-development. But what was the theoretical price to be paid for Hegel’s extrication of subjectivity from substance?

Arguably, Hegel’s conception of subjectivity in its autonomous unfolding wound up losing its moorings in the body and the external world. Spinoza’s conception of selfhood as inextricably caught up in causal relations, by contrast, provided the basis for an *ecologically embedded* perspective that continues to be both more plausible and useful for political theory and practice.⁴¹ Moreover, Spinoza better described and analyzed the affective complexities of our individual and collective lives, in particular, the drama of what he called the “imitation of the affects.”⁴²

Žižek wrongly characterizes Spinoza’s conception of substance as a mere “container” for the multiple identities that comprise our selves.⁴³ Or if we grant Žižek his metaphor, then substance serves at

39 EL 415; see Hegel 2007, p. 156.

40 Pinkard 2005, p. 30.

41 See Sharp 2011.

42 For an overview of Spinoza’s concept of affective imitation, see Macherey 1995, pp. 183-262. For a detailed account of the political implications of the important affect of “glory,” see Stolze 2007.

43 Žižek 2012, p. 381.

most as a very porous and leaky vessel that we would have to describe as an *affectively permeable* container. Although Žižek rightly cautions us not to play the speculative game of “Spinoza anticipated such and such,”⁴⁴ there remains a striking affinity between Spinoza’s treatment in part 2 of the *Ethics* of the composition of hard, soft, and fluid bodies and contemporary scientific research into “sensitive matter” and the remarkable dual-affinity properties of such items as gels, foams, liquid crystals, and cell membranes.⁴⁵ Following Spinoza, perhaps Marxists today should seek to discern the contours of an “amphiphilic”⁴⁶ self that lies between substance and subject—a *sensitive* materialist dialectic, if you will.

Conclusion: Hegel’s logic and Spinoza’s ethics

There can be no question of forcing contemporary Marxists to choose between Hegel and Spinoza.⁴⁷ His critics notwithstanding, Macherey has never opposed a “good” Spinoza to a “bad” Hegel but has instead tried to “show how an insurmountable philosophical divergence” arose between them that generated misunderstanding when their two philosophies confronted each other.⁴⁸ Indeed, the very reason that Hegel failed to comprehend Spinoza was because the latter’s philosophy was at work in his own and posed an internal threat that continually had to be warded off or conceptually contained.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, there remains a question of emphasis. Hegelian grandiosity needs to be tempered by Spinozist modesty. It is well and good to lay claim to a broad vision of the historical process, and strongly to believe that we are oriented in a rational direction: towards ever-greater freedom for all humanity. But actual historical transformation on the ground looks very different—messy, uneven, often boring,

44 See his well-directed criticism in this regard of such prominent neuroscientists as Antonio Damasio (Žižek 2012, p. 717n.4).

45 See Mitov 2012.

46 Mitov’s term for matter composed of dual-affinity molecules, for example, the lecithin in egg yolks without whose mediation between water and oil mayonnaise would not be stable (Mitov 2012, pp. 5-11).

47 Didn’t Žižek (2000) himself once respond to the false alternative between postmodernism and Marxism with an insistent “Yes, please!”

48 Macherey 1998, p. 25.

49 For a penetrating account of how “Spinoza’s philosophy is already realized in Hegel as the true other which he has already become,” see Montag 2012.

frustratingly slow—and then at other times so speeded-up and intense that one may suffer from disorientation or even lapse into what Spinoza termed “vain glory.”⁵⁰ How is it possible to cultivate and sustain such virtues as fidelity, courage, hope, and endurance in the face of the personal risks arising from activism? To answer such questions we must look to Spinoza, not Hegel.

Žižek has argued that Marxists should “proceed like Lenin in 1915 when, to ground anew revolutionary practice, he returned to Hegel—not to his directly political writings, but, primarily, to his *Logic*.”⁵¹ One shouldn’t disparage Lenin his preferred choice of reading material when he retreated momentarily to reflect on the betrayal by so many socialist leaders of their presumed internationalist ideals and their political capitulation at the onset of a barbarous World War I. Moreover, Lenin was making an important philosophical intervention against the prevailing neo-Kantianism of the Second International.⁵² But perhaps—just perhaps—he should also have taken the time to read Spinoza’s *Ethics*. If he had done so, in the margin opposite his famous note “Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!” he might have added Spinoza’s Latin motto: “Caute! Caute! Caute!”⁵³

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50 In E4P58S Spinoza defines vainglory as “an assurance in oneself that is fostered solely by the opinion of the vulgar. When that ceases, so does the assurance, that is...the highest good that each one loves. That is why one who glories in the esteem of the vulgar is made anxious daily, strives, acts, and schemes, in order to preserve his fame. For the vulgar are variable and inconstant; fame, unless it is preserved, is quickly destroyed. Indeed, because everyone desires to gain the applause of the vulgar, each one willingly plays down the fame of another. And since the struggle is over a good thought to be the highest, this gives rise to a monstrous lust of each to crush the other in any way possible. The one who at last emerges as victor glories more in having harmed the other than in having benefited himself. Therefore, this glory, that is, this assurance is really vain; because it is nothing.” On the political danger of vainglory, see Stolze 2007, pp. 332-38.

51 Žižek 2004, p. 32.

52 See Anderson 2007 and Kouvelakis 2007.

53 See Lenin 1972, p. 123. For a discussion of the importance of the Hegelian idea of “leaps,” see Bensaid 2007. A literal translation of “Caute!” is “Be careful!” but a looser “Watch your step!” would probably be more appropriate.

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“Where to Start?: Robert Pippin, Slavoj Žižek, and the True Beginning(s) of Hegel’s System”

Adrian Johnston

ABSTRACT:

Hegel scholarship of the past several decades, especially in the English-speaking world, has been dominated by non/anti-metaphysical interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy. Slavoj Žižek is far from alone in resisting these still-fashionable deflationary variants of Hegelianism. However, his ongoing work, particularly as elaborated in 2012’s *Less Than Nothing*, challenges in especially powerful ways attempts to downplay or jettison the ontological, materialist, naturalist, and realist dimensions of Hegelian thinking. Herein, I focus on Žižek’s disagreements with perhaps the most influential deflationist Hegelian, namely, Robert Pippin (with his thesis that the core of Hegel’s entire apparatus consists in a certain appropriation of Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception and, along with it, the subjectivist anti-realism of Kantian transcendental idealism). Although I am fully sympathetic to the broader cause of combatting deflationary Hegelianism, I opt in what follows, by contrast with Žižek, both: one, to contest directly Pippin’s construal of the importance of the *Critique of Pure Reason*’s “Transcendental Deduction” for Hegel; and, two, to problematize the very idea that the *Logic* alone forms the ground-zero foundation of the Hegelian System (an assumption arguably underpinning aspects of both Pippin’s and Žižek’s otherwise strikingly divergent approaches to Hegel).

Keywords:

Kant, Hegel, Pippin, Žižek, metaphysics, transcendentalism, subjectivity

So as to initiate a critical engagement with Slavoj Žižek’s *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, I want to start, suitably enough, by addressing the nature of beginning(s) in G.W.F. Hegel’s thinking. In an earlier book, 1996’s *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, Žižek identifies “the problem of Beginning itself” as “the crucial problem of German Idealism.”¹ *Less Than Nothing* contains a reference to this problem specifically with respect to the opening of Hegel’s *Logic*:

...when he writes about the passage from Being to Nothingness, Hegel resorts to the past tense: Being does not pass into

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¹ Žižek 1996, p. 13.

Nothingness, it has always already passed into Nothingness, and so on. The first triad of the Logic is not a dialectical triad, but a retroactive evocation of a kind of shadowy virtual past, of something which never passes since it has always already passed: the actual beginning, the first entity which is 'really here,' is the contingent multiplicity of beings-there (existents). To put it another way, there is no tension between Being and Nothingness which would generate the incessant passage of one into the other: in themselves, prior to dialectics proper, Being and Nothingness are directly and immediately the same, they are indiscernible; their tension (the tension between form and content) appears only retroactively, if one looks at them from the standpoint of dialectics proper.²

Žižek then, in the immediately following paragraph, goes on to claim that the beginning of Hegelian Logic interpreted thusly already in and of itself furnishes readers with the groundless ground of a materialist ontology of radical, ultimate contingency.³ Prior to any evaluation of whether Žižek is entitled to this claim on the basis he provides in this instance, the above block quotation needs to be exegetically unpacked.

In the preceding quotation, Žižek clearly chooses to pinpoint "Determinate Being"/"Being-there" (das Dasein) as the true starting point of the metaphysical/ontological Logic of Hegel (i.e., "Book 1, Section 1, Chapter 2" of the Science of Logic and what is inaugurated with §89 in the Encyclopedia Logic). Of course, since the mid-twentieth century, the German word "Dasein" has come to be most closely associated with Martin Heidegger and his existential phenomenology. This is quite ironic in that Hegel's logical dialectics of Being, Nothing, and Becoming (including implicitly on Žižek's interpretation) can be understood as entailing a pointed critique avant la lettre of Heidegger's pivotal conception of "ontological difference." Hegel likely would accuse Heidegger of being logically inconsequential in his sharp distinguishing between Being and beings, thereby remaining unproductively confined to the initial moments of (onto)logical thinking in his fascination with a Being that is indistinguishable from Nothing (as

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2 Žižek 2012, pp. 228-229.

3 Žižek 2012, p. 229.

on display in, for instance, Heidegger's well-known 1929 essay "What Is Metaphysics?"⁴). Moreover, for Hegel, the opening moments of his Logic also capture what is essential to the chronological origins in ancient Greece of the history of Western philosophy,⁵ with Heidegger's fetishization of these Greeks and their language, inherited from the German Romantics, thus further testifying to a dialectical-speculative inhibition/limitation marking Heideggerian phenomenological ontology. Hegel emphasizes repeatedly that pure Being on its own prior to any and every further determination (such as the Heideggerian ontological apart from the ontic) is the most meager and abstract of (onto-)logical moments⁶ (although some were and still are tempted to mistake the undeveloped poverty of its vacuous superficiality for the accumulated wealth of profound depths of mysterious, ineffable meanings).

Heidegger aside, Žižek's above-quoted pinpointing of the "real beginning" of Hegelian Logic is an instance of a long-running, ongoing activity amongst scholars of Hegel and German idealism: debating about from where the Hegelian System actually starts. Some of the biggest (if not the biggest) questions concerning how to appreciate the relationship (or lack thereof) between the Phenomenology of Spirit and the various versions of the mature Logic hinge on the topic of when and how Hegelian philosophy proper gets well and truly underway. Disregarding those significant questions in the present context of considering what Žižek asserts about the beginning of the Logic alone (I will return to these questions later), one could say that, as regards the three major divisions of both the Science of Logic and the Encyclopedia Logic (i.e., the three books of the "doctrines" of "Being" [Sein], "Essence" [Wesen], and "Concept" [Begriff]), each division has been claimed by specific Hegel scholars as the genuine primordial nucleus of the Hegelian logical network. Recent examples arguably would include: Stephen Houlgate for "The Doctrine of Being" (with the thesis that Hegel begins precisely where he appears to begin, namely, without presuppositions and with indeterminate Being)⁷; Dieter Henrich for "The Doctrine of Essence" (with the thesis that "The Doctrine of Being"

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4 Heidegger 1993, pp. 89-110.

5 Hegel 1969a, pp. 31, 83-84, 88; Hegel 1991b, p. 10; Hegel 1991c, §13-14 (pp. 37-39), §86 (p. 138); Hegel 2008, §87 (pp. 88-89); Hegel 1955a, pp. 1-2, 4-5, 18, 29-30, 34-39, 45.

6 Hegel 1969a, pp. 73-75; Hegel 1991c, §51 (p. 99), §85-88 (pp. 136-145); Hegel 2008, §51 (p. 52), §87 (pp. 90-91).

7 Houlgate 2006, pp. 263, 266-267; Houlgate 2005, pp. 32, 40, 43-46.

tacitly presupposes from its very outset, in order to get the dialectical-speculative ball rolling even just from Being to Nothing, the conceptual and categorial distinctions introduced subsequently only with “The Doctrine of Essence”⁸; and Robert Pippin for “The Doctrine of the Concept” (with the thesis that Hegel’s praise in “The Doctrine of the Concept” for Immanuel Kant’s “transcendental unity of apperception” of the Critique of Pure Reason’s “Transcendental Deduction” signals that the Logic arises from and is anchored by Kantian-style cognizing subjectivity as per the “Subjective Logic” coming after the first two doctrines together constituting the “Objective Logic”).⁹ At least in *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek seems to be a partisan of “The Doctrine of Being” as the true launching platform for Hegelian Logic, albeit (by contrast with, for instance, the example of Houlgate) with the caveat that the launch gets delayed until determinate Being-there congeals out of Becoming.

As regards questions and controversies about beginning(s) in Hegel’s philosophy, I elect to zero in below on Pippin as a privileged foil for Žižek, and this for two reasons: First, in *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek himself does this; And, second, Pippin, by my estimation, has good reasons for challenging the kinds of exegetical positions regarding the true start of Hegelian Logic put forward by, among many others, Houlgate and Henrich. Apropos this second reason, Pippin’s position draws support from the facts that Hegel both characterizes Logic from start to finish as a “thinking about thinking”¹⁰ as well as treats it as a circle whose end (“The Doctrine of the Concept”) rejoins its beginning (“The Doctrine of Being”), with the former retroactively making explicit what the latter always-already was implicitly (in the manner of T.S. Eliot’s “to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time”).¹¹ Apropos the first reason here, one of Žižek’s main objections to Pippin has to do with the latter’s renowned “deflationary” (i.e., post/anti-metaphysical) rendition of Hegel.

Of course, Pippin is not the first or only advocate of a non-

8 Henrich 2010, pp. 104-105, 114-117, 121-128, 139-141, 143-150, 152-155; Henrich 2003, pp. 320-321.

9 Pippin 1989b, pp. 6, 9, 17, 33-35, 76, 79-80, 83-85, 91, 96-98, 104, 108, 111-112, 114-115, 120-121, 124-125, 132, 139-142, 152-154, 167-170, 176, 182-183, 224-225, 241-242, 284, 304; Pippin 1990, pp. 843-844.

10 Hegel 1986c, §2 (p. 65); Hegel 1986d, §1 (p. 74); Hegel 1969a, p. 43-44; Hegel 1991c, §17 (p. 41), §19 (pp. 45-46); Hegel 2008, §19 (p. 1).

11 Hegel 2002e, p. 249; Hegel 1986e, §86 (p. 122); Hegel 1969a, pp. 71-72, 838-842; Hegel 1971, §574 (p. 313); Hegel 2008, §235-236 (p. 227).

metaphysical version of Hegelianism. A far from exhaustive alphabetical list of the names of partisans of this (diverse) family of reconstructions would include: Robert Brandom, Klaus Hartmann, Jean-François Kervégan, Terry Pinkard, Paul Redding, and Allen Wood (with Karl Ameriks providing a helpful overview of some of the main representatives and orientations within this constellation of Hegel interpretations¹² as well as criticizing Pippin in particular¹³). Especially in the Anglophone world, this cluster of overlapping reconstructions of Hegelian thought has influenced profoundly the past four decades of Hegel scholarship, starting with Hartmann’s¹⁴ and Charles Taylor’s¹⁵ interventions in the 1970s. Although Taylor proposes a metaphysical reading of Hegel, he knowingly depicts this purportedly “cosmic” metaphysics to be too ridiculously puffed up to be a palatable, plausible option for philosophers of the present age, thus furnishing a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* (one accepted by Wood, among others) in favor of deflationary discardings of the metaphysical aspects of Hegel’s System. Žižek rightly rejects Taylor-style depictions of Hegelian metaphysics.¹⁶

However, even more recently, a number of scholars of German idealism have begun to push back against the still rather fashionable non/anti-metaphysical renditions of Hegel. Amongst the growing ranks of deflationism’s discontents are Frederick Beiser,¹⁷ Brady Bowman,¹⁸ Markus Gabriel,¹⁹ Rolf-Peter Horstmann,²⁰ Houlgate,²¹ James Kreines,²²

12 Ameriks 1992, pp. 177-202.

13 Ameriks 1991, pp. 386-402.

14 Hartmann 1972, pp. 101-124; Hartmann 1976, pp. 1-30.

15 Taylor 1975, pp. 27, 39-40, 44-45, 537-571.

16 Žižek 2012, pp. 285-286.

17 Beiser 1993, pp. 1-24; Beiser 1995, pp. 1-13; Beiser 2002, pp. 558-560; Beiser 2005, pp. 55-57; Beiser 2008, pp. 1-14.

18 Bowman 2013, pp. 5-7, 14-15, 18, 23-24, 36, 38, 97-98, 102-104, 109, 125, 133-135, 142-143, 145, 148-150, 153, 156, 181-182, 215-216, 219, 222-223, 227, 229-230, 238, 241, 247-248, 255-258.

19 Gabriel 2011, pp. viii-ix, xii, xix-xxii, 1, 3, 54, 60.

20 Horstmann 2004, pp. 133-134, 138-141.

21 Houlgate 2006, pp. 137-143; Houlgate 2013, pp. 193-194.

22 Kreines 2006, pp. 466-480; Kreines 2008, pp. 48-70.

Sally Sedgwick,²³ Robert Stern,²⁴ Kenneth Westphal,²⁵ myself,²⁶ and Žižek too. Despite differences amidst the multiple advocates of various flavors of deflated Hegelianism—there have been direct, detailed debates between some of them²⁷—they share in common, as Beiser lucidly explains in language borrowed from none other than Karl Marx, the conviction that the “rational kernel” of Hegel’s investments in Kantian transcendentalism and/or socio-historical angles of philosophical approach should be salvaged from the “mystical shell” of his more ambitious global ontology, especially as embodied by his Realphilosophie of nature²⁸ (i.e., those aspects of Hegel’s musings that appear to veer into [neo-]Platonic and/or Romantic visions of a metaphysically real God-like Notion as a kind of cosmic super-organism or Mega-Mind). Pippin, over the course of his own intellectual itinerary, has shifted his attention and focus between the two basic poles of the deflationist spectrum, from an early emphasis on Hegel’s fidelity to Kant’s transcendental idealism (as per his groundbreaking, now-classic 1989 study Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness) to a later highlighting of the social and historical dimensions of the Hegelian edifice (as per such texts as 2008’s Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life and 2011’s Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit, texts in which Hegel seems to be presented as being a social rationality pragmatist of a Brandomian inferentialist kind avant la lettre—with this presentation being made possible by Pippin’s underlying [over] emphasis on the theme of apperception in Hegel).

Quite appropriately in a chapter (the fourth) of *Less Than Nothing* entitled “Is It Still Possible to Be a Hegelian Today?,” Žižek targets deflated Hegelianism à la Pippin (along with mention of the post-Sellarsian Pittsburgh neo-Hegelianism of Brandom and John McDowell).²⁹ His remarks in this vein are worth quoting:

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23 Sedgwick 2012, pp. 9-11, 62, 96, 125-126.

24 Stern 2009a, pp. 1-41; Stern 2009b, pp. 45-76.

25 Westphal 1993, pp. 263-272.

26 Johnston 2012, pp. 103-157; Johnston 2014a, pp. 13-64; Johnston 2014c.

27 Pinkard 1989, pp. 5-17; Pinkard 1990, pp. 831-838; Pippin 1989a, pp. 28-41; Pippin 1990, pp. 839-848; Pippin 1993, pp. 285-295; Sedgwick 1993, pp. 273-283.

28 Beiser 2002, pp. 508-511.

29 Žižek 2012, p. 237.

If... in ontological terms, spirit naturally evolves as a capacity of natural beings, why not simply endorse materialist evolutionism? That is to say, if—to quote Pippin—‘at a certain level of complexity and organization, natural organisms come to be occupied with themselves and eventually to understand themselves,’ does this not mean that, precisely in a certain sense nature itself does ‘develop into spirit?’ What one should render problematic is precisely Pippin’s fragile balance between ontological materialism and epistemological transcendental idealism: he rejects the direct idealist ontologization of the transcendental account of intelligibility, but he also rejects the epistemological consequences of the ontological evolutionary materialism. (In other words, he does not accept that the self-reflection of knowledge should construct a kind of bridge to materialist ontology, accounting for how the normative attitude of ‘accounting for’ itself could have emerged out of nature.)³⁰

On the next page, Žižek proceeds to argue:

...the point is not that one should take sides and opt for one consistent stance, either evolutionary materialism or speculative idealism. The point is rather that one should fully and explicitly accept the gap which manifests itself in the incompatibility of the two stances: the transcendental standpoint is in a sense irreducible, for one cannot look ‘objectively’ at oneself and locate oneself in reality; and the task is to think this impossibility itself as an ontological fact, not only as an epistemological limitation. In other words, the task is to think this impossibility not as a limit, but as a positive fact—and this, perhaps, is what at his most radical Hegel does.³¹

This Hegel, “at his most radical,” is the Žižekian one in whose “parallax view” apparent gaps in knowledge (maintained as merely epistemological by Kantianism, including by Pippin’s Kantianized

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30 Žižek 2012, p. 238.

31 Žižek 2012, p. 239.

Hegel-as-transcendental-idealist) reappear as real gaps in being qua being an und für sich.³² This involves the transition from Kant to Hegel being portrayed as a matter of a shift from the positing of breaks exclusively at the level of epistemology (Kant) to the assertion of these very same breaks (also) at the level of ontology (Hegel).³³ For Žižek, the proper Hegelian gesture to be performed vis-à-vis Pippin's allegedly inconsistent position with respect to the split between the seemingly incommensurable ontological options of "either evolutionary materialism or speculative idealism" is not to force a decision one way or the other according to the taken-for-granted parameters of this binary opposition. Instead, the Žižekian Hegel both, one, eschews the Kantian inclination to shield the noumenal Real of Sein an sich from the rifts and ruptures phenomenally manifesting themselves within the cognizing subject's knowing as well as, two, treats the apparent choice between the first-person perspective of idealism and the third-person perspective of materialism as a false dilemma—with the consequence that the appearance of discrepancy between these perspectives is not just that, namely, a mere appearance as an epistemological epiphenomenon deprived of any ontological status and weight. Elsewhere in *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek makes this same set of moves with respect to the division within the Marxist tradition between its two fundamental approaches to theorizing human beings: The gap between the "social" à la historical materialism and the "natural" à la dialectical materialism is not to be closed in favor of one approach over the other but, rather, to be affirmed as directly reflecting a gap really perturbing from within the substance of humanity's very being itself.³⁴ Moreover, as a close reading of the early moments of *Less Than Nothing* readily makes evident, the topic of appearance, featuring centrally in Žižek's critical handling of Pippin, is one of the most important red threads tying together the entirety of his hulking 2012 philosophical masterpiece. Herein, I want to push the critique of Pippin's deflationary Hegelianism further and, in so doing, address both Pippin's and Žižek's conceptions of where, when, and how Hegel's *Logic* actually begins (an issue I raised a short while ago here).

Pippin hangs an enormous amount of interpretive weight on one

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32 Johnston 2008, pp. 155, 162-163, 179, 209, 236, 241, 245-246, 263-265, 275; Johnston 2014a, pp. 111-138.

33 Johnston 2014b.

34 Žižek 2012, pp. 393-394.

single passage in particular from "The Doctrine of the Concept" in the *Science of Logic*³⁵ (Brandom likewise highlights this same passage³⁶). Arguably, Pippin's overarching Kantianization of Hegel's philosophy as a whole, in addition to his reading of the *Logic* specifically, hinges on this particular stretch of text as its Archimedean point. Preliminarily addressing "the concept in general" at the start of the "Subjective *Logic*" formed by the third book of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel declares at great length:

It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the unity (Einheit) which constitutes the nature of the Notion (das Wesen des Begriffs) is recognized as the original synthetic unity of apperception (die ursprünglich-synthetische Einheit der Apperzeption), as unity of the I think, or of self-consciousness. This proposition constitutes the so-called transcendental deduction of the categories; but this has always been regarded as one of the most difficult parts of the Kantian philosophy, doubtless for no other reason than that it demands that we should go beyond the mere representation (die bloße Vorstellung) of the relation in which the I stands to the understanding, or notions (Begriffe) stand to a thing and its properties and accidents, and advance to the thought (Gedanken) of that relation. An object, says Kant, is that in the notion of which the manifold of a given intuition is unified. But all unifying of representations demands a unity of consciousness in the

synthesis

of them. Consequently it is this unity of consciousness which alone constitutes the connection of the representations with the object and therewith their objective validity and on which rests even the possibility of the understanding. Kant distinguishes this unity from the subjective unity of consciousness (die subjektive Einheit des Bewußtseins), the unity of representation whereby I am conscious of a manifold as either simultaneous or successive, this being dependent on empirical conditions. On the other hand, the principles of the objective determination of notions (objectiven Bestimmung der Vorstellungen) are, he says, to be derived solely from the principle of the transcendental unity of apperception (der

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35 Pippin 1989b, pp. 17-18, 35, 232; Pippin 1989a, pp. 30-31; Pippin 1990, p. 843; Pippin 1993, p. 288; Pippin 1997, p. 131; Pippin 2005, pp. 47-52; Pippin 2011, p. 10; Ameriks 1991, p. 400.

36 Brandom 2002, pp. 53-54, 216-217.

transzendentalen Einheit der Apperzeption). Through the categories which are these objective determinations, the manifold of given representations is so determined as to be brought into the unity of consciousness. According to this exposition, the unity of the notion is that whereby something is not a mere mode of feeling, an intuition, or even a mere representation (bloße Gefühlsbestimmung, Anschauung oder auch bloße Vorstellung), but is an object (Objekt), and this objective unity is the unity of the ego with itself (welche objektive Einheit die Einheit des Ich mit sich selbst ist). In point of fact, the comprehension of an object (Das Begreifen eines Gegenstandes) consists in nothing else than that the ego makes it its own, pervades (durchdringt) it and brings it into its own form (seine eigene Form), that is, into the universality that is immediately a determinateness, or a determinateness that is immediately universality. As intuited or even in ordinary conception, the object is still something external and alien (Äußerliches, Fremdes). When it is comprehended, the being-in-and-for-self (Anundfürsichsein) which it possesses in intuition and pictorial thought (Vorstellen) is transformed into a positedness (Gesetztsein); the I in thinking it pervades it. But it is only as it is in thought that the object is truly in and for itself; in intuition or ordinary conception it is only an Appearance. Thought sublates the immediacy with which the object at first confronts us and thus converts the object into a positedness; but this its positedness is its-being-in-and-for-self, or its objectivity (Objektivität). The object (Gegenstand) therefore has its objectivity in the Notion (Begriffe) and this is the unity of self-consciousness into which it has been received; consequently its objectivity, or the Notion, is itself none other than the nature of self-consciousness, has no other moments or determinations than the I itself.³⁷

The first sentence of the immediately following paragraph goes on to state, “Thus we are justified by a cardinal principle of the Kantian philosophy in referring to the nature of the I in order to learn

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37 Hegel 1969c, pp. 254-255; Hegel 1969a, pp. 584-585.

what the Notion is.”³⁸ Hegel explicitly refers in particular to B137 in the “Transcendental Deduction” (§17 therein, entitled “The principle of the synthetic unity of apperception is the supreme principle of all use of the understanding”) of the Critique of Pure Reason.³⁹ On Pippin’s construal, the Kantian transcendental unity of apperception likewise is “the supreme principle” of Hegel’s philosophy as itself ultimately grounded on and by the Logic—and this insofar as such a unity is taken to be the underlying agency of cognition responsible for driving the entire activity of logical, dialectical-speculative thinking (as a “thinking about thinking”) from its very inception with pure Being alone. Both the Science of Logic and the Encyclopedia Logic thereby look to be rectifications of what Hegel sees (along with many other of Kant’s contemporaries and immediate successors) as the unacceptable absence of a systematic, scientific (als Wissenschaft) derivation of the concepts and categories of the understanding from the transcendental unity of apperception in the “Transcendental Analytic” of the first Critique (with K.L. Reinhold and J.G. Fichte kicking off post-Kantian German idealism through their anti-Jacobian efforts to remedy this lack of sufficient systematicity/scientificity in the Kantian critical-transcendental apparatus).⁴⁰

In addition to Žižek’s criticisms of the deflationary depiction of Hegelianism à la Pippin, what else might be objectionable specifically as regards Pippin’s anchoring of his reconstruction of Hegel in the above-quoted passage from the Science of Logic praising Kant’s unity of apperception as per the B-version of the “Transcendental Deduction?” To thoroughly answer this question would be to destabilize Pippin’s deflationary Hegelianism at its very root, to undermine the fundamental load-bearing pillar of this exegetical edifice. Žižek does not go for this particular jugular in *Less Than Nothing*, although doing so would serve him well. Moreover, other dissenters from Pippin’s Kantianized Hegel such as H.S. Harris, Sedgwick, and Stern, despite their different sets of objections to Pippin, all concede that his construal of Hegel’s relationship to Kant’s “Transcendental Deduction” is one of the (if not the) great strengths of his approach, granting that this construal illuminates places in the Hegelian corpus such as the preceding block

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38 Hegel 1969a, p. 585.

39 Kant 1998, B137 (p. 249).

40 Hegel and Schelling 2002, p. 212; Hegel 1977c, pp. 142-145; Hegel 1969a, pp. 613-614; Hegel 1991c, §42 (p. 84), §60 (pp. 107-108); Hegel 1955b, p. 483; Hegel 2008, §42 (p. 35); Johnston 2014b.

quotation from the Science of Logic.⁴¹

Rather than seek to rebut Pippin through explicitly contesting his overriding stress on references to apperception by Hegel while implicitly conceding the accuracy of Pippin's interpretation of these same references (as some of his other critics have done), I will, in what follows, attempt to demonstrate why and how the very moment to which Pippin appeals actually does not bring Hegel back into the proximity of the specifically subjective idealism of Kantian transcendentalism. As is appropriate in a Hegelian discussion about Hegel, my critique of Pippin is immanent rather than external, working from the inside and developing itself out of Pippin's own chosen starting point. That said, a first manner of objecting to Pippin would be to note that Hegel's praise for Kant's transcendental unity of apperception is preceded by moments in both the Phenomenology of Spirit and the Science of Logic itself (as well as other articulations of the Logic) in which the alleged two-worlds metaphysics of the subjectivism of Kantian (and Fichtean) transcendental idealism is dialectically sublated.⁴² This means that, as one might describe it, Hegel pays Kant a backhanded compliment, with the principle of unity extolled already being, at this late stage in Hegelian Logic, so heavily qualified by Hegel's Kant critique as to no longer really be Kantian per se.

Directly related to this, Pippin appears not to appreciate in relation to the above-quoted lengthy passage from the Science of Logic just what a huge difference Hegel's own distinction between subjective and objective/absolute idealisms makes to the significance of his reference to Kant's transcendental unity of apperception (although such Hegelians as Westphal and Thomas Wartenberg do appreciate precisely this⁴³). This Hegelian distinction surfaces in both the Phenomenology and stages of the various versions of the Logic coming well before the "Subjective Logic" consisting of "The Doctrine of the Concept" inordinately privileged by Pippin.⁴⁴ For Kant, this principle of unity at the heart of the first Critique's "Transcendental Deduction" is the Ur-core of all genuine knowledge both actual and possible. But, this

41 Harris 1989, p. 26; Sedgwick 1993, pp. 273, 275; Stern 2009b, p. 48.

42 Hegel 1977c, pp. 88-91, 100-101; Hegel 1969a, pp. 121, 134-135, 490, 507; Hegel 1991c, §44 (p. 87), §60 (p. 105); Hegel 2008, §44 (p. 37).

43 Westphal 1993, pp. 263-272; Wartenberg 1993, pp. 104-107, 109-110, 117, 120, 122, 125-126, 128.

44 Hegel 1977c, pp. 139-146; Hegel 1969a, pp. 45-47, 51, 61-64, 489; Hegel 1991c, §41-42 (pp. 81-84), §45 (pp. 88-89); Hegel 2008, §43-44 (pp. 36-37).

very nucleus of the theoretical part of critical philosophy is, of course, ensconced within the framework of the subjectivism of transcendental idealism. Consequently, for Hegel, Kantian subjective idealism results in the ridiculous thesis that, as he puts it in the introduction to the Science of Logic, cognizing subjects are limited to having true knowledge solely of false appearances (which makes a mockery of the very notions of truth and knowledge).⁴⁵ Hegel observes therein:

This is like attributing to someone a correct perception (richtige Einsicht), with the rider (Zusatz) that nevertheless he is incapable of perceiving (einzusehen) what is true (Wahres) but only what is false (Unwahres). Absurd as this would be, it would not be more so than a true knowledge (wahre Erkenntnis) which did not know the object (Gegenstand) as it is in itself (wie er an sich ist).⁴⁶

Hegel uses the word "Gegenstand" in both this quotation and the long, above-quoted passage from the Science of Logic relied upon by Pippin (in the latter, he alternates between "Gegenstand" and "Objekt" when referring to the "object" forming the correlate of the subject qua transcendental unity of apperception). By contrast with subjective idealism as Kantian transcendentalism (here specifically its anti-realism regarding objects treated as mere phenomenal appearances [i.e., as "false"] deprived of the actuality of ontological heft [i.e., as "true"]), Hegelian absolute idealism is robustly realist regarding the objectivities related to by subjectivities⁴⁷ (in the 1801 Differenzschrift, Hegel is willing, pace Kant, Fichte, and a certain Reinhold, to acknowledge that even a materialism such as that of Baron d'Holbach is not without its relevance to his and F.W.J. Schelling's absolute idealism⁴⁸). However, Hegel arrives at this absolute idealist position in a non-dogmatic and properly post-Kantian fashion by virtue of achieving a reaffirmed ontological realism precisely via an immanent critique passing through (and not simply bypassing altogether) Kant's critical problematizations of pre-Kantian realist ontologies.⁴⁹

45 Hegel 1969a, pp. 45-47.

46 Hegel 1969b, p. 39; Hegel 1969a, p. 46.

47 Hegel 1969a, pp. 154-155; Johnston 2014a, pp. 13-64; Johnston 2014c.

48 Hegel 1977a, p. 177.

49 Hegel 1975, p. 57.

In light of Henry Allison's quite plausible interpretation of the "Transcendental Deduction," according to which Kant posits a "reciprocity thesis" holding that the transcendental unity of apperception entails a mutual, two-way interdependency of knowing subject and known object upon each other (with the claim that the subject can know itself as a unifying producer only in and through the produced unity reflected back to it by the objects it itself is responsible for unifying), Hegel's absolute idealist appropriation of Kant's subjective idealist transcendental unity of apperception cannot but involve a fundamental transformation of the sense and implications of the latter.⁵⁰ A famous one-liner from the Critique of Pure Reason, one directly related to what Allison has in view apropos the alleged reciprocity between apperceiving subjectivity and apperceived objectivity, has it that, "The a priori conditions of a possible experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience."⁵¹ With his absolute idealism as, in part, a sublation of subjective idealism in its anti-realist, deontologized one-sidedness, Hegel arguably radicalizes the reciprocity at the base of Kant's "Transcendental Deduction" such that the (epistemological) truthfulness of this just-quoted one-liner from the first Critique must be counterbalanced by also positing the equal (ontological) truthfulness of its precise inversion: "Conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience (i.e., the "in itself" [an sich] delineated in the "Objective Logic" prior to the "Subjective Logic" of "The Doctrine of the Concept") are at the same time the a priori conditions of a possible experience in general (i.e., the "in and for itself" [an und für sich] delineated in the "Subjective Logic" only after the "Objective Logic")."

Additional clarity and concreteness can be lent to this by another return to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: specifically, the opening of its third section on "Reason" (Vernunft) (Ameriks and Harris both correctly note that Pippin, although preserving a crucial role for the Phenomenology in the mature [post-1807] Hegelian System,⁵² ignores this section in his predominant focus on the preceding first two sections dealing with "Consciousness" [Bewußtsein] and "Self-Consciousness"

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50 Kant 1998, B136-139 (pp. 248-250); Allison 1983, pp. 144-145.

51 Kant 1998, A111 (p. 234).

52 Pippin 1988, p. 17; Pippin 1989b, pp. 38, 91-94, 178, 256; Pippin 1989a, p. 32; Pippin 1990, pp. 843-844, 847-848.

[Selbstbewußtsein]⁵³). In the wake of the dialectics running from Consciousness through Self-Consciousness, the Reason arising at the start of this third section is characterized by Hegel as being "certain"—however, at this juncture, it still has yet to prove the "truth" (Wahrheit) of this its certainty (Gewißheit) through the tests of its experiences—of the existence of fundamental structural isomorphisms between its minded subjectivity and worldly objectivity.⁵⁴ Reason balances out the lop-sided preponderances of object and subject posited by the earlier figures of Consciousness and Self-Consciousness respectively. It does so by adopting the view, into which it has been driven by the preceding dialectical moments sublating the shapes in the Phenomenology coming before it, that:

...self-consciousness (Selbstbewußtsein) and being (Sein) are the same essence (Wesen), the same, not through comparison, but in and for themselves (an und für sich). It is only the one-sided, spurious idealism (einseitige schlechte Idealismus) that lets this unity (Einheit) again come on the scene as consciousness (Bewußtsein), on one side, confronted by an in-itself (Ansich), on the other. But now this category or simple (einfache) unity of self-consciousness and being possesses difference in itself; for its essence is just this, to be immediately one and selfsame in otherness (Anderssein), or in absolute difference (absolute Unterschiede). The difference therefore is, but is perfectly transparent, and a difference that is at the same time none. It appears as a plurality of categories.⁵⁵

To begin with, the objection to Kantian transcendental idealism as subjectivism in this passage is so obvious as not to require deciphering and explanation. Moreover, Hegel's wording here in the Phenomenology is echoed in Pippin's preferred later moment of the Science of Logic, thus indicating that the latter text's kind words for the transcendental unity of apperception of the B-Deduction are significantly tempered by a rejection of the type of idealism to which Kant shackles this transcendently deduced unity. In the Science of Logic, Hegel recasts Kant's transcendental unity of apperception as (to

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53 Ameriks 1992, pp. 199-200; Harris 1989, p. 27.

54 Hegel 1970c, pp. 178-181; Hegel 1977c, pp. 139-142.

55 Hegel 1970c, pp. 181-182; Hegel 1977c, p. 142.

paraphrase the Phenomenology) the becoming-subject of substance, namely, a pre-existent objectivity in itself (“something external and alien”) being “comprehended,” “pervaded,” and thereby “idealized” so as to achieve the status of (also) being in and for itself via subjectivity (with subjectivity in this instance being nothing other than the self-reflectivity/reflexivity of substantial objectivity itself). As the above quotation manifestly shows (along with adjacent material in the same text⁵⁶), this recasting transpires already in the Phenomenology even before it occurs again in the Science of Logic.

Additionally, Hegel's recourse in this passage to the language of post-Kantian dialectical-speculative logic (in particular, non-bivalent ideas about the identity of identity and difference⁵⁷) marks a break with Kant (in particular, the classical logic of Kant's faculty of the non/pre-speculative understanding [Verstand]) that allows Hegel to be both an idealist and a realist simultaneously. As he maintains in the Science of Logic's first book right on the heels of stringently criticizing Kant and Fichte, “the opposition of idealistic and realistic philosophy has no significance.”⁵⁸ Already in his 1801 Differenzschrift, Hegel indicates that true idealism also involves realism (pace Kant's and Fichte's subjectivism qua anti-realism).⁵⁹ In 1802's article “How the Ordinary Human Understanding Takes Philosophy (as Displayed in the Works of Mr. Krug),” he gestures at a form of (post-)Kantian idealism overcoming the ostensibly false dilemma between realism and idealism— “transcendental idealism does not just concede... but asserts the reality of the external world, just as much as its ideality.”⁶⁰ His 1803/1804 Jena “First Philosophy of Spirit” is utterly scathing about the anti-realism of subjective idealism.⁶¹ And, he repeats these stipulations apropos idealism in the Encyclopedia.⁶² Considering the sustained maintenance of this stance on the realism-idealism distinction by Hegel in various texts from 1801 until his death, Pippin's dismissal of the Science of

.....
56 Hegel 1977c, p. 144.

57 Hegel 2002c, p. 154; Hegel 1977a, p. 156; Schelling 1984, pp. 136, 143.

58 Hegel 1969a, p. 155.

59 Hegel 1977a, pp. 115, 127, 165-167.

60 Hegel 2002d, p. 229.

61 Hegel 1979, pp. 223-226.

62 Hegel 1991c, §95-96 (pp. 152-153).

Logic's “Remark on Idealism” in “The Doctrine of Being” (from which I quoted a moment ago) as unrepresentative of Hegel's own convictions is quite dubious.⁶³

Immediately following the above block quotation in the Phenomenology, Hegel voices the complaint he often repeats, along with his fellow post-Kantian idealists, about Kant's alleged dogmatic, unsystematic cutting-and-pasting from antiquated traditional logic textbooks in the composition of his “Transcendental Analytic” of the concepts and categories of the understanding (i.e., the lack therein of a properly scientific deduction of these concepts and categories).⁶⁴ And, in the exact same context, he also directly addresses the matter of the Kantian transcendental unity of apperception in a manner undeniably foreshadowing his later comments upon it in the Science of Logic:

...only in the unity of apperception lies the truth of knowing (nur die Einheit der Apperzeption ist die Wahrheit des Wissens). The pure Reason (Die reine Vernunft) of this idealism, in order to reach this ‘other’ (Anderen) which is essential to it, and thus is the in-itself (Ansich), but which it does not have within it, is therefore thrown back by its own self on to that knowing which is not a knowing of what is true (Wahren); in this way, it condemns itself of its own knowledge and volition to being an untrue kind of knowing, and cannot get away from ‘meaning’ (Meinen) and ‘perceiving’ (Wahrnehmen), which for it have no truth (Wahrheit). It is involved in a direct contradiction (schlechthin Entgegengesetztes); it asserts essence (Wesen) to be a duality of opposed factors, the unity of apperception and equally a Thing (das Ding); whether the Thing is called an extraneous impulse (fremder Anstoß), or an empirical or sensuous entity (empirisches Wesen oder Sinnlichkeit), or the Thing-in-itself (das Ding an sich), it still remains in principle the same, i.e. extraneous (Fremde) to that unity.⁶⁵

These assertions audibly resonate with Hegel's reduction, in a portion of the Science of Logic I referenced earlier, of the epistemology

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63 Pippin 1993, p. 289.

64 Hegel 1977c, pp. 142-145.

65 Hegel 1970c, pp. 184-185; Hegel 1977c, pp. 144-145.

of Kantian transcendental idealism to the absurdity of treating “true” knowledge as a knowing of admittedly false appearances (i.e., ideal phenomenal objects unrelated to and different-in-kind from real noumenal things—the latter including, on this reading, supposed pure intuitions [als Sinnlichkeit] as passively received hypothetically prior to their transubstantiation into actual objects of experience by the concepts and categories of the understanding⁶⁶). Kant’s anti-realist subjectivism, with its non/pre-speculative, Verstand-style oppositional dualism between subject (as the transcendental unity of apperception) and object (as das Ding an sich), backs him into this indefensible corner (with the phrase “fremder Anstoß” in the quotation immediately above, Hegel signals that Fichte, as likewise a subjectivist transcendental idealist, is in the crosshairs here too). But, what qualifies as an alternate version of the transcendental unity of apperception that manages to be both realist and yet, at the same time, also idealist in ways that reflect Kant’s valuable epistemological insights?

This question can be answered with a single proper name: Francis Bacon, the founding figure of British empiricism who, in his 1620 *New Organon*, erects the basic scaffolding of modern scientific method (at the same time that Galileo contributes another key component to the foundations of scientific modernity, namely, the identification of mathematics as the language of nature⁶⁷). Bacon not only provides the lone epigraph for the *Critique of Pure Reason*⁶⁸—Kant also, in the 1787 “Preface to the Second Edition” of the first *Critique*, explicitly compares the Copernican revolution of his critical-transcendental turn at the level of first philosophy (as metaphysics qua integrated epistemology and ontology) with “the suggestion of the ingenious Francis Bacon” at the level of natural science.⁶⁹ In particular, Kant credits Bacon with a spontaneous, proto-idealist realization to the effect that the order, pattern, and regularity of the apparently lawful world of nature must be produced through the practices of minded and like-minded subjects (in Bacon’s case, nature reveals its laws only in and through the process of scientific investigators actively submitting it to empirical, experimental interrogation and probing directed in advance by theoretical and

66 Kant 1998, B145 (pp. 253-254).

67 Galileo 1957, pp. 274-278.

68 Kant 1998, Bii (p. 91).

69 Kant 1998, Bxii (p. 108).

methodological guidelines⁷⁰). In Kant’s prefatory narrative here, the first *Critique*’s transcendental idealism raises Baconian empiricism to the dignity of its notion (as Hegel might put it) by insisting that subjectivity makes possible every knowable and known objectivity, whether in the natural sciences or any other branch of whatever could count as genuine knowledge per se.⁷¹

In the opening pages of the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on “Reason,” particularly the start of this section’s first major division on “Observing Reason” (*Beobachtende Vernunft*), Hegel is referring implicitly to this Bacon in addition to (as seen in the quotations I discussed above from the *Phenomenology*) the Kant of the “Transcendental Deduction.” The figure of Observing Reason, which culminates in the self-subverting dead end of phrenology’s infinite judgment “Spirit is a bone,”⁷² represents the *Weltanschauung* of modern science circa the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially this worldview’s naturalism with its obsessive (and ultimately self-destructive qua auto-dialecticizing) pursuit of natural laws. The very first paragraph of the sub-section on “Observing Reason” can be understood solely through appreciating Bacon’s tacit presence in its background:

It is true that we now see this consciousness (*Bewußtsein*), for which Being [*Sein*] means what is its own [*Seinen*], revert to the standpoint of ‘meaning’ (*Meinen*) and ‘perceiving’ (*Wahrnehmen*); but not in the sense that it is certain of what is merely an ‘other’ (*Anderen*). Previously, its perception and experience (*erfahren*) of various aspects of the Thing (*Dinge*) were something that only happened to consciousness; but here, consciousness makes its own observations and experiments. ‘Meaning’ and ‘perceiving,’ which previously were superseded for us (*für uns früher sich aufgehoben*), are now superseded by and for consciousness itself. Reason sets to work to know the truth (*die Wahrheit zu wissen*), to find in the form of a Notion (*Begriff*) that which, for ‘meaning’ and ‘perceiving,’ is a Thing; i.e. it seeks to possess in thinghood (*Dingheit*) the consciousness only of itself. Reason now has, therefore, a universal interest in

70 Bacon 2000, pp. 21, 24, 33-35.

71 Kant 1998, Bxii-xiv (pp. 108-109).

72 Hegel 1977c, pp. 208-210.

the world (allgemeines Interesse an der Welt), because it is certain of its presence in the world, or that the world present to it is rational. It seeks its ‘other,’ knowing that therein it possesses nothing else but itself: it seeks only its own infinitude (Unendlichkeit).⁷³

Hegel’s primary concern in this paragraph is to distinguish the Reason (Vernunft) of the third section of the Phenomenology from the Consciousness (Bewußtsein) of the first section. Despite potential misunderstandings to the contrary, the Reason whose initial incarnation is in the rational observation of nature (as per the empirical, experimental, mathematized sciences of modernity co-founded by Bacon and Galileo early in the seventeenth century) is not tantamount to a simple regressive return, in the aftermath of the dialectical self-sublation of the Self-Consciousness (Selbstbewußtsein) of the Phenomenology’s intervening second section, to the phenomenologically previous standpoint specifically of the first two figures of Consciousness, namely, Sense-Certainty (sinnliche Gewißheit) and Perception (Wahrnehmung). For Hegel, the primary significant difference between Sense-Certainty and Perception, on the one hand, and Observing Reason, on the other hand, has to do with, as he emphasizes in the above block quotation, the contrast between passivity and activity—with Bacon’s stress on the active role of the scientific investigator being pivotal both historically and (phenomeno) logically in this precise context.

Consciousness overall, including Sense-Certainty and Perception, sets as its own standard of the ultimately True a notion of objectivity as utterly independent of subjectivity and passively received/registered by the latter (the Self-Consciousness of the subsequent section reverses Consciousness’s prioritization of objectivity over subjectivity). Reason, by contrast, sublates both Consciousness and Self-Consciousness such that its orienting standard of the Whole Truth is a rationally articulable ensemble of structures and dynamics common to both subjectivity and objectivity. These structures and dynamics are described by Hegel in language that risks being misconstrued as subjectively idealist in that he speaks of “concepts,”

73 Hegel 1970c, pp. 185-186; Hegel 1977c, pp. 145-146.

“ideas,” “logic,” “syllogisms,” and the like,⁷⁴ terms that have strong associations with images of mindedness in which subjective mind is set apart from objective world à la pre-Hegelian (i.e., non-dialectical/speculative) versions of the subject-object distinction (with Hegel warning of this risk and the need to avoid it⁷⁵—a caution underscored by, among others, Ludwig Siep⁷⁶ and Westphal⁷⁷). However, by this point in the Phenomenology with Reason, subjective idealism (including the Kantian transcendental variety) has been sublated (both in the final sub-section on “Consciousness” [the chapter entitled “Force and the Understanding”] as well as the section on “Self-Consciousness” in its entirety). That is to say, starting with Reason, the Phenomenology presents a non/post-subjective idealism (i.e., an objective and/or absolute idealism) in which apparently subjectivist language actually designates a rational reality composed of configurations that cut across the subject-object divide, being both objective (as substantially “in themselves” apart from any and all knowing subjects) and subjective (if and when they become also “for themselves” through human mindedness and like-mindedness) and reflected in isomorphisms between conceptual logics operative in subjects and objects alike.⁷⁸ After the advent of Reason in the Phenomenology, any endorsements by Hegel of idealism, including Kant’s variety with its transcendental unity of apperception, both in the rest of this 1807 book as well as his post-Phenomenology System in its entirety must be appreciated as invariably qualified by his immanent critical sublation of subjectivism, especially that coloring Kantian and Fichtean transcendental idealisms on Hegel’s readings of them.⁷⁹

Reason generally and Observing Reason particularly rise out of the ashes of the preceding section of the Phenomenology on Self-Consciousness (culminating in the “Unhappy Consciousness” of primarily medieval Christianity). Through his specific staging of the

74 Hegel 1977c, pp. 88, 170-171, 177, 178-179.

75 Hegel 1969a, pp. 664, 669, 826-827; Hegel 1991c, §24 (pp. 56-57).

76 Siep 1991, pp. 71, 75-76.

77 Westphal 1993, p. 268.

78 Hegel 1977c, p. 151; Hegel 1986b, §40-42 (pp. 63-64); Hegel 1955b, pp.181-182; Hegel 2008, §24-25 (pp. 15-18), §95 (p. 110); DeVries 1988, pp. 110, 114-115, 175, 177-178, 196-197, 200; Harris 1997, p. 490; Quante 2011, pp. 93, 133.

79 Johnston 2012, pp. 115-118; Johnston 2014c.

transition between Self-Consciousness and Reason, Hegel intends to convey the claim that the Christianity of the Unhappy Consciousness historically and (phenomeno)logically paves the way and serves as a possibility condition for the modern secular sciences of nature born early in the seventeenth century—and this despite the fact that the rational scientific Weltanschauung that takes shape thanks to the contemporaries Bacon, Galileo, and René Descartes promptly comes to generate a tension between itself and the religion of its historical background. This is definitely an instance of, as the Phenomenology's introduction puts it, a transition between figures of phenomenal consciousness (as Self-Consciousness and Reason, in this case) transpiring “behind the back of consciousness.”⁸⁰ Simply stated, science fails to recognize or remember its indebtedness to the religion out of which it emerges and with which it quickly enters into lasting conflict after this its emergence.⁸¹ Moreover, Hegel indicates that Reason, first and foremost as Observing Reason, is especially prone to ahistorical amnesia (the proof of this being that working scientists need not and often do not pay much attention to the history of their disciplines).⁸²

To be more precise, Hegel has in mind in the context presently under consideration the role that God fulfills in Descartes's philosophy as expressed in the latter's 1640/1641 Meditations on First Philosophy. Therein, the singular Supreme Being is reduced to serving as not much more than an ultimate guarantor of the veracity of both perceptually-based empirical (aposteriori) knowledge as well as conceptually-based non-empirical (apriori) knowledge. As with, approximately three centuries later, Albert Einstein's God who does not play games with dice, Descartes's divinity is not an unreliable deceiver, trickster, or the like. In addition to Bacon's contribution of an epistemologically formalized/generalized methodology and Galileo's of the identification of mathematics as the language of nature, Descartes, at least tacitly, contributes to the foundations of modern science its supporting assumption that being is a rule-bound, stable field of existence knowable by thinking, with the signifier “God”

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80 Hegel 1977c, p. 56.

81 Hegel 1977c, pp. 137-139.

82 Hegel 1977c, pp. 141-142.

naming this presupposition.⁸³ Without such an assumption, scientific investigators never could launch into their inquiries in the first place with the requisite inaugural confidence and conviction that, at least in principle, reality is law-like and, hence, comprehensible in the form of posited laws with predictive power. This non-empirical article of faith provides an indispensable philosophical/metaphysical ground for the empirical disciplines themselves, including modernity's experimental, mathematized sciences of nature. The God of the Unhappy Consciousness (i.e., what Hegel designates in this sub-section of the Phenomenology “the Unchangeable,”⁸⁴ thus already foreshadowing this depiction of Descartes's) in which Self-Consciousness culminates continues to live on in and through the apparently secular (or even atheistic) rationality subsuming (as both preserving and negating) Him.⁸⁵ Likewise, the “Holy Spirit” of the universal fellowship of believers united by faith and recognition in God morphs into the community of scientists, a community whose presence is entailed already in Baconian scientific method itself and whose powers of recognition are responsible for determining what does and does not count as genuine, true knowledge. Additionally, an earlier moment of Self-Consciousness also persists into and contributes to the new scientific rationality: The technological apparatuses, devices, implements, instruments, tools, etc. as well as the technical skills to employ them, as jointly constituting a savoir-faire crucial to Bacon's Novum Organum Scientiarum essentially involving experimentation (and, hence, crucial to scientific savoir tout court),⁸⁶ are inherited by Reason from the history of labor beginning with the slavery famously figuring in the sub-section of Self-Consciousness on “Lordship and Bondage” (with serfs, artisans, craftsmen, and so on conserving and enriching this historically accumulated know-how extending across anonymous generations of unsung laborers).⁸⁷

The opening paragraph of the section on Reason in the Phenomenology portrays this new shape of consciousness/Spirit as taking over and translating into its own terms (as per the positive, preservative side of the Aufhebung) a number of elements initially

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83 Pinkard 1996, p. 81.

84 Hegel 1977c, pp. 131-132, 134-138.

85 Johnston 2012, pp. 114-115; Johnston 2014c.

86 Bacon 2000, pp. 18, 33.

87 Hegel 1977c, pp. 115-116, 117-118.

characteristic of the Unhappy Consciousness of Self-Consciousness. Utilizing his non-subjectivist logical language, Hegel here employs the structure of the syllogism so as to establish the parallels and continuities between Self-Consciousness and Reason: Vernunft, first incarnated as the rational scientific observer of nature, becomes aware of itself as a syllogistic middle term (i.e., the mediator assuming the position previously occupied for Unhappy Consciousness by the priest as clerical conduit mediating relations with the divine) between, on the one hand, a universal term (i.e., God qua the Unchangeable become the God's-eye “view from nowhere” of modern science's methodologically secured objective viewpoint on the world) and, on the other hand, a particular term (i.e., the individual persons qua members of the congregation/flock become the specific empirical entities and events of concern to the scientist).⁸⁸ This syllogistic formulation helps further sharpen the distinction between Consciousness (particularly as Sense-Certainty and Perception) and Reason: Not only, as I already noted, is Consciousness passive and Reason active (with this emphasis on activity reflecting Reason's successor position as an inheritor of the intervening legacies of Self-Consciousness)—while the objects of Consciousness are conceived by it nominalistically as sensory-perceptual individualities qua utterly unique thises, thats, and others, the “same” objects are, for Vernunft in its modern scientific shape, particular embodiments or manifestations of universal patterns and rules (i.e., laws amenable to formalized generalizations, such as causal laws of nature). That is to say, Reason's primary concern is with what is intelligibly universal in sensuous particulars, whereas Consciousness is fixated on and in thrall to the latter alone⁸⁹ (a point Hegel later underscores in his Berlin-era history-of-philosophy lecture on Bacon⁹⁰).

Now, having clarified the historical and (phenomeno)logical backdrop to Reason as the preliminary appearance of what proceeds to become Hegelian absolute idealism proper (or, one could say, of Vernunft as the an sich of absolute idealism an und für sich), I still have to respond directly to two questions raised by prior stretches of my preceding remarks: First, how does Hegel's implicit reference to Bacon in 1807 inform his appropriation of Kant's transcendental unity of

.....
88 Hegel 1977c, p. 139.

89 Hegel 1977c, pp. 139, 147-149, 154; Johnston 2012, pp. 119-120.

90 Hegel 1955b, pp. 175-177.

apperception (both in the Phenomenology itself as well as the passage of the Science of Logic repeatedly brandished by Pippin)? Second, how does the answer to the previous question affect Pippin's interpretation of apperception in Hegel's idealism? Apropos the first of these queries, Hegel reverses Kant's above-cited narrative, in the preface to the B-version of the first Critique, about the relationship between Bacon and critical transcendental idealism. Kant sees the Copernican revolution of his idealism as the consequent advancement and coming to fruition of the germinal seed of Bacon's insight into the necessary contribution of the inquirer's subjective activities to what is revealed as the objective content of true knowledge in and through these same inquiries. By contrast, for Hegel, Kant's (subjective) idealism is retrograde in comparison with Bacon's proto-idealism, lagging behind what it claims to be merely one of its historical precursors. Not (yet) burdened by the baggage of an anti-realist subjectivism freighted with fatal, (self-) dialecticizing inconsistencies, Bacon, with his combination of an empiricist, naturalist realism and proto-idealist appreciation of active subjectivity as a co-constituter of known reality, is philosophically closer to Hegel's absolute idealist metaphysics than is Kant's transcendental idealist epistemology chronologically (and geographically/culturally) closer to Hegel. Even in the Phenomenology, the logical arguably has priority over the chronological, one consequence of this being that speculative solutions to dialectical problems sometimes occur historically out of sequence, with answers to questions surfacing in linear historical time before the questions themselves have been (explicitly) posed.⁹¹ By Hegel's lights, the Bacon-Kant relationship is an illustration of precisely this: Baconian Vernunft already overcomes the self-subverting one-sidedness of the subjectivism of Kantian critical-transcendental idealism in a manner foreshadowing Hegel's own absolute idealist sublation of Kantianism. In line with the Vernunft of Hegelian absolute idealism, Bacon already sketches the rudimentary contours of an immanent unity of apperception—more precisely, such a unity as a subjectivity sharing a dialectical-speculative identity-in-difference with objectivity within an overarching one-world metaphysics (as opposed to Kant's two-worlds metaphysics).⁹²

Apropos the question of how the immediately preceding impacts

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91 Johnston 2014c.

92 Johnston 2012, pp. 118-121.

Pippin's reconstruction of the Kant-Hegel relationship, my highlighting of Hegel's interweaving of simultaneous references to both Bacon and Kant in the "Reason" section of the Phenomenology (an interweaving with respect to which Pippin remains silent) hopefully drives home the point that the Pippinian brand of deflationary Hegelianism is a highly selective revision of Hegel's actual philosophy, one replacing absolute with subjective idealism wholesale (here, my verdict on Pippin agrees with that pronounced by Houlgate,⁹³ although Houlgate and I each reach this shared judgment by different exegetical and argumentative routes). Taking the "absolute" out of absolute idealism and ignoring the absolute idealist dialectical-speculative sublation of subjectivist one-sidedness (i.e., sidelining and neglecting both Hegel's critique of Kantian transcendentalism as subjective idealism as well as his 1807 elevation of Bacon over Kant apropos the metaphysics of active subjective agency) certainly allows for a creative reconstruction of Hegel as, for the most part, a good Kantian. But, simply put, this is not Hegel. Especially considering the weight of the evidence I already have provided for this critical contention vis-à-vis Pippin—this evidence is drawn mainly from textual moments prior to Pippin's favorite passage on the transcendental unity of apperception from "The Doctrine of the Concept" in the Science of Logic—additional testimony drawn from textual moments subsequent to Pippin's key piece of evidence for his Kantianizing interpretation further substantiates my counter-claims against this interpretation. As the immediately ensuing will show, Hegel himself would reject the post-Kantian anti-realism Pippin tries to attribute to him. Hegel's somewhat pro-Bacon, anti-Kant account of Reason breaks with Kant's subjectivism, resting as this subjectivism does on speculatively-dialectically untenable dualisms of a sub-rational (als Vernunft) Verstand-type supporting anti-materialist, anti-naturalist perspectives alien to both Bacon's and Hegel's idealisms.

As in the Science of Logic, Hegel, in the prefatory treatment of Kantian critical philosophy in the Encyclopedia Logic, also pronounces a few approving words with respect to the transcendental unity of apperception.⁹⁴ But, once again, as soon as he voices this sympathy he significantly qualifies it, immediately adding with respect to Kant's pure apperceiving "I":

.....
93 Houlgate 2006, pp. 139-143.

94 Hegel 1991c, §42 (pp. 84-85).

Now this certainly expresses correctly the nature of all consciousness (die Natur alles Bewußtseins). What human beings strive (Streben) for in general is cognition of the world; we strive to appropriate it and to conquer it (sie sich anzueignen und zu unterwerfen). To this end the reality of the world (die Realität der Welt) must be crushed (zerquetscht) as it were; i.e., it must be made ideal (idealisiert). At the same time, however, it must be remarked that it is not the subjective activity of self-consciousness that introduces absolute unity into the multiplicity in question; rather, this identity is the Absolute, genuineness itself (Zugleich ist dann aber zu bemerken, daß es nicht die subjektive Tätigkeit des Selbstbewußtseins ist, welche die absolute Einheit in die Mannigfaltigkeit hineinbringt. Dieses Identität ist vielmehr das Absolute, das Wahrfhafte selbst). Thus it is the goodness of the Absolute (die Güte des Absoluten), so to speak, that lets singular [beings] (Einzelheiten) enjoy their own selves (Selbstgenuß), and it is just this that drives them back into absolute unity (treibt sie in die absolute Einheit zurück).⁹⁵

To begin with, both here and in his other invocations of the transcendental unity of apperception (ones quoted by me earlier), Hegel, contra Pippin's subjectivist anti-realism, implies that the absolute idealist (as also realist) sublated version of this Kantian principle involves positing that "the reality of the world," as already unified and formed in itself ("it is not the subjective activity of self-consciousness that introduces absolute unity into the multiplicity in question"), objectively pre-exists the synthesizing/unifying activities of subjectivity. That is to say, if this real world is "appropriated," "conquered," "crushed," and "idealized," it must already be there, as a pre/non-subjective presence, to be submitted to these "strivings" of the apperceiving, (self-)conscious subject.⁹⁶ When Pippin himself quotes the above passage from the Encyclopedia in support of his Kantian anti-realist version of Hegel, he ignores this directly implied preexistence of an asubjective real as unified/formed in and of itself.⁹⁷

Furthermore, in the preceding block quotation from the

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95 Hegel 1970b, §42 (p. 118); Hegel 1991c, §42 (p. 85).

96 Hegel 2002b, pp. 116, 118-120; Lukács 1978, p. 9.

97 Pippin 1993, pp. 290-291.

Encyclopedia Logic, the “drunk on God” (à la Novalis) talk of “the Absolute” so anathema to all permutations of deflationary Hegelianism (Pippin’s included) promptly follows and directly qualifies the ambivalent characterization of Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception. This serves as a reminder of a fundamental feature of post-Fichtean German idealism beginning with Friedrich Hölderlin’s “Über Urtheil und Seyn” of 1795 and “The Earliest System-Program of German Idealism” of 1796,⁹⁸ a feature coming to form a red thread running across the entire length of Hegel’s intellectual itinerary: The infinite Absolute as substance also becomes self-reflective/reflexive in and through finite minded subjectivity, with the latter and its cognizing (self-)conscious activities remaining fully immanent to the substantial, absolute infinity out of which it arose as its ontological ground (if finite subjective reflection were to fall outside of this infinity, the infinite would be rendered finite, the Absolute less than absolute).⁹⁹ As the deservedly celebrated preface to the Phenomenology already maintains, the Absolute, in its proper absoluteness, includes within itself reflection on the Absolute (something maintained right on the heels of the famous “Substance... equally as Subject” line).¹⁰⁰ Hegel warns there that, “Reason is... misunderstood when reflection is excluded from the True, and is not grasped as a positive moment of the Absolute” (Es ist... ein Verkennen der Vernunft, wenn die Reflexion aus dem Wahren ausgeschlossen und nicht als positives Moment des Absoluten erfaßt wird)¹⁰¹—with “the True” here being “the Whole” (Das Wahre ist das Ganze),¹⁰² namely, the dialectically self-sundering absolute substance dividing into itself and its (self-)reflection in and through subjectivity. Hence, pace Pippin’s repeated maneuver of drawing Hegel close to Kant’s epistemological finitism via the former’s mentions of the latter’s transcendental unity of apperception, Hegelian absolute idealism, by marked contrast with Kantian transcendental idealism, recasts this unity as a transcendent-while-immanent transcendental function (re-)unified

98 Hölderlin 1972, pp. 515-516; Hegel 2002a, p. 110; Vaysse 1994, p. 138; Pinkard 2002, pp. 141-142; Förster 2012, p. 279; Johnston 2014a, pp. 13-22; Johnston 2014b.

99 Johnston 2014a, pp. 13-22.

100 Hegel 1977c, pp. 10-12.

101 Hegel 1970c, p. 25; Hegel 1977c, pp. 11-12.

102 Hegel 1970c, p. 24; Hegel 1977c, p. 11.

with an infinite ontological base.¹⁰³ Pippin’s deflationary finitization qua epistemological deontologization and deabsolutization of Hegel de-Hegelianizes Hegel himself.

Additional moments in Hegel’s corpus bearing witness against Pippin’s Kantianization of him via the topic of apperception are to be found in “The Doctrine of the Concept” as the “Subjective Logic” of the Science of Logic (i.e., in the very same place from where Pippin extracts Hegel’s admiring remarks about the first Critique’s “Transcendental Deduction”). In fact, just a couple of pages later, the fourth paragraph subsequent to the paragraph extolling the importance of Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception (albeit, as seen, with significant caveats and reservations) states the following:

...the Notion (der Begriff) is to be regarded not as the act of the self-conscious understanding (selbstbewußten Verstandes), not as the subjective understanding (subjektive Verstand), but as the Notion in its own absolute character (der Begriff an und für sich) which constitutes a stage of nature (Stufe der Natur) as well as of spirit (Geistes). Life, or organic nature, is the stage of nature at which the Notion emerges, but as blind, as unaware of itself and unthinking (nicht denkender Begriff); the Notion that is self-conscious and thinks pertains solely to spirit. But the logical form of the Notion is independent of its non-spiritual (ungeistigen), as also of its spiritual (geistigen), shapes (Gestalten des Begriffs).¹⁰⁴

Later in the Science of Logic, Hegel devotes the entirety of the introduction to the third and final section of “The Doctrine of the Concept” on “the Idea” (die Idee) to dismissing subjective idealist understandings of the ideational. He emphasizes, by pointed contrast, that his Idea is an absolute idealist one essentially involving the identity-in-difference of the subjective and the objective.¹⁰⁵ All of this qualifies Hegel’s appropriations of Kantian critical philosophy both in the Science of Logic itself and elsewhere.

With its proximity to the invocation of Kant’s “Transcendental Deduction,” the preceding block quotation is crucial to appreciate at this juncture. The transcendental unity of apperception is situated at (and

103 Quante 2011, p. 121.

104 Hegel 1969c, p. 257; Hegel 1969a, p. 586.

105 Hegel 1969a, pp. 755-760; Hegel 1990, §162 (p. 128).

as) the very heart of the first Critique's analysis of Verstand. Hence, it is firmly circumscribed within the field of phenomenal experience and its limits as co-constituted by the two faculties of intuition and the understanding. Therefore, Hegel's above disqualification of "subjective understanding" qua "the act of the self-conscious understanding" strikes at nothing other than the apperceiving activity of synthesizing self-consciousness as per the "Transcendental Deduction" ambivalently referenced four paragraphs earlier in the Science of Logic. Unlike in transcendental idealism, with its subjectivism (and corresponding aversions to realism, naturalism, and materialism), "der Begriff an und für sich" is as much "non-spiritual" (i.e., asubjectively objective qua natural, substantial, etc.) as it is "spiritual" (i.e., subjective, whether as individual [self-]consciousness or the socio-historical collectivities of "objective spirit"). Moreover, the Notion/Concept (der Begriff) as self-aware thinking subjectivity (i.e., the side of this closer to Pippin's Kant) is explicitly rendered by Hegel here, already anticipating the philosophical anthropology and psychology of the third volume of the Encyclopedia on Philosophy of Mind, as emergent vis-à-vis nature generally and organic, living beings specifically.¹⁰⁶ This posit or anything like it would be inadmissible within the epistemological confines of the Kantian critical-transcendental idealism leaned upon by Pippin.

As seen, Žižek, both implicitly and explicitly throughout *Less Than Nothing*, challenges in various ways Pippin's tendency to situate Hegelian subjectivity within the anti-materialist, anti-naturalist, and anti-realist framework of the subjectivism of Kantian transcendental idealism as grounded in the apperceptive unity of (self-)consciousness. The second paragraph of the preface to Hegel's 1801 *Differenzschrift* provides yet more ample support for opposition (whether Žižekian or not) to Pippin's deflationary rapprochement between the Kant of the "Transcendental Deduction" and Hegel (and, with Pippin himself citing this very same paragraph in support of his Kantianizing interpretation,¹⁰⁷ I am opting once again, as with the passage in the Science of Logic's "Doctrine of the Concept" on the "Transcendental Deduction," for an immanent-critical line of contestation):

The Kantian philosophy needed to have its sprit (Geist)

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¹⁰⁶ Hegel 1986a, p. 185; Hegel 1970d, §376 (pp. 443-445); Hegel 1971, §381 (pp. 8, 13-14), §388-389 (pp. 29-31), §391 (pp. 35-36), §412 (pp. 151-152).

¹⁰⁷ Pippin 1989b, pp. 6, 17, 35; Pippin 1989a, pp. 28-29.

distinguished from its letter (Buchstaben), and to have its purely speculative principle lifted out of the remainder that belonged to, or could be used for, the arguments of reflection (der rasonierenden Reflexion). In the principle of the deduction of the categories Kant's philosophy is authentic idealism (echter Idealismus); and it is this principle that Fichte extracted in a purer, stricter form and called the spirit of Kantian philosophy. The things

in themselves—which are nothing but an objective expression of the empty form of opposition—had been hypostasized anew by Kant, and posited as absolute objectivity like the things of the dogmatic philosophers. On the one hand, he made the categories into static, dead pigeonholes of the intellect (Intelligenz); and on the other hand he made them into the supreme principles capable of nullifying the language that expresses the Absolute itself—e.g., 'substance' in Spinoza. Thus he allowed argumentation (negative Rasonieren) to go on replacing philosophy, as before, only more pretentiously than ever under the name of critical philosophy. But all this springs at best from the form of the Kantian deduction of the categories, not from its principle or spirit (Prinzip oder Geist). Indeed, if we had no part of Kant's philosophy but the deduction, the transformation (Verwandlung) of his philosophy [from speculation into reflection] would be almost incomprehensible. The principle of speculation is the identity of subject and object (die Identität des Subjekts und Objekts), and this principle is most definitely articulated in the deduction of the forms of the intellect (Verstand). It was Reason (Vernunft) itself that baptized this theory of the intellect.¹⁰⁸

Hegel here unambiguously distinguishes between the non-speculative qua subjective idealist "letter" and the speculative qua absolute idealist "spirit" of Kant's "Transcendental Deduction." Already in 1801, he heavily qualifies his praise of the Kantian transcendental unity of apperception in the exact same manners he does later in such texts as the Science of Logic (with me having cited and unpacked these subsequent instances in the course of substantiating my criticisms of Pippin earlier). Moreover, he signals that his post-Kantianism is a sublation als *Aufhebung*, being at least as much "post-" in the sense

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¹⁰⁸ Hegel 1970a, pp. 9-10; Hegel 1977a, pp. 79-80.

of surpassing as “post-” in the different sense of preserving; apropos both the transcendental unity of apperception as well as transcendental idealism überhaupt, Hegelian “speculation” (i.e., absolute idealism) is a “transformation (Verwandlung),” instead of a continuation, of Kantian “reflection” (i.e., subjective idealism).

As the above passage from the *Differenzschrift* indicates, Hegel’s interpretation of the “Transcendental Deduction” is very much along the lines of (albeit avant la lettre) the Allisonian “reciprocity thesis” reading—and this insofar as an equivalence can be maintained between Hegel’s “identity of subject and object (die Identität des Subjekts und Objekts)” and Allison’s “reciprocity” between apperceiving subjectivity and apperceived objectivity. This reciprocity thesis, as subject-object identity, is the Critique of Pure Reason’s “purely speculative principle,” namely, that by virtue of which “Kant’s philosophy is authentic idealism (echter Idealismus)” (i.e., absolute, rather than subjective, idealism). In the preceding block quotation, Hegel treats everything other than this moment of identity in the first Critique as “the remainder that belonged to, or could be used for, the arguments of reflection (der rasonierenden Reflexion)” (i.e., a subjective idealist worldview with a Verstand-style opposition between subjectivity qua ideal thinking and objectivity qua real being, with the former as entirely external to the latter). Hegel suggests an exegetical thought experiment in which one faces the “Transcendental Deduction” on its own, freed from its position as sandwiched between, in particular, “the remainder” formed by the “Transcendental Aesthetic” (as insisting upon the strict ideality of space and time¹⁰⁹) and the “Transcendental Dialectic” (as buttressing this anti-realist insistence of the Aesthetic through supposedly demonstrating the contradictory, illogical consequences of any robustly realist option¹¹⁰). He justifiably sees the Kantian Aesthetic and Dialectic, by which the Deduction is surrounded in the first Critique, as working together to cement in place the two-worlds metaphysics of the reflective intellect/understanding, a Weltanschauung in which the subject-object reciprocity of the Deduction is confined to one world (i.e., the subjective/ideal one of phenomenal experience with its objects-as-appearances) separate from another world (i.e., the objective/real one of noumenal things-in-themselves). Worded in Hegelian fashion, the

109 Kant 1998, A26/B42-A49/B66 (pp. 159-171), B66-73 (pp. 188-192).

110 Kant 1998, A493-494/B521-522 (p. 512), A506-507/B534-535 (p. 519).

Kantian unity of subject and object is a unity internal to the subject itself (i.e., a one-sided unity).

Additionally, even though Fichte, for the Hegel of the *Differenzschrift*, makes progress beyond Kant by jettisoning das Ding an sich, Fichtean transcendental idealism is as or more subjectivist than the Kantian variety—with, as Hegel insists in 1801, Fichte’s subject-object identity remaining a lop-sided, wrongly absolutized identity confined exclusively to the subject alone.¹¹¹ Tellingly, Pippin stresses the importance of Fichte for Hegel and relatedly depicts the Hegelian identity of subject and object in the shadow of the dissolution of Kant’s thing-in-itself as a Fichtean subjective idealist one qua internal solely to subjectivity itself.¹¹² Not only does this downplay Hegel’s sustained critique of Fichte in the *Differenzschrift*—it correlatively neglects Schelling’s importance here, with Schelling’s philosophies of nature and identity representing a Hölderlin-heralded, post-Fichtean objective/absolute idealism to which Hegel remains steadfastly committed throughout his mature intellectual itinerary (even long after his break with Schelling). Of course, as is well known, Hegel’s first philosophical publication of 1801 largely sides with Schelling’s identity-philosophical counter-balancing of the subjective subject-object of Fichtean transcendental idealism with the objective subject-object of the Schellingian philosophy of nature¹¹³ (Pippin symptomatically selects the young Schelling’s 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*, the more Fichtean side of his early endeavors prior to his rupture with Fichte publicly announced through the publication of 1801’s “Presentation of My System of Philosophy,” for mention as an influence on Hegel’s development¹¹⁴).

At various points throughout his oeuvre, Hegel sublates the dualist metaphysics of Kantian transcendental idealism as a self-subverting (attempted) absolutization of the subject-object dichotomy upheld by the external, formal understanding in the guise of an inflexible, brittle dualism between mental thinking and worldly being. In particular, his 1801 vision of the Deduction minus both the Aesthetic and the Dialectic is one in which the “object” of subject-object identity is

111 Hegel 1977a, pp. 81-83, 117, 133, 135, 155, 157-158, 162.

112 Pippin 1989b, pp. 42-44, 83, 98, 168.

113 Hegel 1977a, pp. 82-83, 157, 159-162, 165-169, 172-174.

114 Pippin 1989b, p. 64.

no longer merely the phenomenal object-as-appearance but, instead, a genuinely objective (as extra/non-subjective) object an sich (i.e., not the “formless lump” of das Ding an sich,¹¹⁵ but, instead, an asubjective yet formed/unified objectivity). That is to say, Hegel’s immanent critiques of the two-worlds metaphysics of transcendental idealism, with its anti-realist subjectivism as embodied in the related theses apropos the strict ideality of space and time as well as the existence of things-in-themselves, allow for interpretively appropriating the transcendental unity of apperception of the “Transcendental Deduction” such that this unity is no longer enclosed within the limits of the merely conscious, mental, and subjective as deontologized, epistemological, and exclusively ideal. This immanent-critical possibility for sublating Kant’s Deduction testifies to the fact that, although Kant himself debatably restricts his subject-object identity (or, as per Allison, reciprocity) to the one side of the subject only, this identity is open to an absolute idealist speculative re-reading once the anti-realist arguments of the first Critique’s Aesthetic and Dialectic are justifiably left by the wayside (with this openness helping to explain what Hegel means when he says in 1801 that, “It was Reason (Vernunft) itself that baptized this theory of the intellect”). Thus, the Differenzschrift adds yet more weight to my prior claims that Pippin misconstrues Hegel’s references to Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception as drawing the former closer to the subjective idealism of the latter.

Given that I began this intervention with the question of beginnings in Hegel’s philosophy and Žižek’s perspectives on German idealism, how is my problematization of Pippin’s use of the transcendental unity of apperception to establish a certain continuity between Kant and Hegel linked to this point of departure? As earlier remarks by me already indicate, the link is simple and direct: Insofar as Pippin identifies his Kantianized version of “The Doctrine of the Concept” as the genuine logical start of the Hegelian system (by contrast with those, such as Houlgate, Henrich, and Žižek, who advocate for “The Doctrine of Being” or “The Doctrine of Essence” as the locus of proper beginning in Hegel’s Logic), my critique of Pippin’s portrayal of Hegel’s relationship to the “Transcendental Deduction” of the first Critique inhibits the gesture of elevating Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception to the status of grounding primordial moment of Hegel’s philosophical edifice as a whole. In fact, I wish to move towards a

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¹¹⁵ Hegel 1977b, pp. 76-77.

conclusion with the proposal that the entire debate amongst readers of Hegel about where the Hegelian system well and truly gets underway in the Logic rests on two questionable assumptions shared by participants in this debate (and this despite their otherwise fierce disagreements amongst themselves): First, there is a stable beginning, a fixed starting point, to be found somewhere within the Logic; And, second, the Logic itself (or, at least, some moment[s] within it) is the foundational, one-and-only proper beginning of Hegel’s systematic philosophical apparatus in its entirety.

Contra these two assumptions, I assert that: First, the Logic in its full sweep is composed of a series of (spectacular) failed attempts to begin with thinking alone (with thinking, at the end of this series, driving itself out of and beyond itself into the Real of the Realphilosophie, first as objectively real spatio-temporal nature in its externality¹¹⁶); And, second, there is no single Ur-beginning in Hegel’s philosophy, but, instead, at least three different beginnings incommensurable yet equiprimordial with respect to each other (these two proposals are more specific versions of suggestions also gestured at by Sedgwick¹¹⁷). Starting with my first assertion here, a snippet from the recently published collection of Žižek’s Jokes is fitting to quote at this juncture:

There is the ultimate good news/bad news doctor joke that reaches the dark limit of a joke; it starts with the good news, which, however, is so ominous that no further bad news is needed: ‘Doctor: First the good news: we definitely established that you are not a hypochondriac.’ No need for a counterpoint here. (Another version: ‘Doctor: I have some good news and some bad news. Patient: What’s the good news? Doctor: The good news is that your name will be soon a household name all around the world—they are naming a disease after you!’) Is this a nondialectical short circuit? Or is it rather the proper dialectical beginning that immediately negates itself? Something like this joke happens at the beginning of Hegel’s logic, not a passage to the opposite, but the beginning’s immediate self-sabotage.¹¹⁸

The back cover of the collection containing this passage

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¹¹⁶ Hegel 1969a, pp. 843-844; Hegel 1991c, §244 (p. 307); Hegel 2008, §244 (pp. 232-233); Hegel 1970d, §253-254 (pp. 28-29), §257-258 (pp. 34-35).

¹¹⁷ Sedgwick 2012, p. 156.

¹¹⁸ Žižek 2014, p. 54.

cites Ludwig Wittgenstein's statement that, "A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes." My suggestion for how to read Hegel's Logic could be construed as involving a reversal of this Wittgensteinian assertion: The Science of Logic (or other versions of the Logic, such as the first volume of the Encyclopedia) amounts to a long sequence of jokes delivered in the form of a serious and good philosophical work (further support for this can be found in Ernst Bloch's reflections on "Hegel and Humor"¹¹⁹). In both *Less Than Nothing* and Žižek's *Jokes*, Žižek denies that the very beginning of the Logic (i.e., the initial triad of Being, Nothing, and Becoming) really is a beginning. However, as I highlighted during the opening of this essay, the Žižek specifically of *Less Than Nothing* claims that "Determinate Being"/"Being-there" (das Dasein), the immediate successor-moment to Becoming in "The Doctrine of Being," indeed is to be understood as the actual start of Hegelian Logic after the false starts of its opening trinity. That is to say, Žižek limits "the beginning's immediate self-sabotage" in Hegel's *Science of Logic* and *Encyclopedia Logic* to these texts' literal beginnings with the Being-Nothing-Becoming triad. Not only does this leave him exposed to the objections that the likes of a Henrich or Pippin would raise to treating any moment whatsoever of "The Doctrine of Being" as the proper starting point of the Logic—it is less than optimally consistent with and buttressing of the specifically dialectical materialist version of Hegelian philosophy aimed at by *Less Than Nothing*.

This leads directly to my second above-expressed assertion regarding the three distinct varieties of beginnings in Hegel's framework, with each one enjoying its own mode of precedence/priority vis-à-vis the other two. As with Jacques Lacan's Borromean knot, the Hegelian System is a configuration whose existence and integrity depends upon all three of its dimensions as equally indispensable constituents, this arguably being part of what is at stake in some of Hegel's (often opaque) remarks about syllogistic structures.¹²⁰ Of course, the *Encyclopedia*, as articulating the core of Hegelian *Wissenschaft*, is structured by two basic organizing divisions, a two-part and a three-part division: first, a two-part division between *Logik* and *Realphilosophie*; and, second, a three-part division between, on

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119 Bloch 1970, pp. 136-140.

120 Hegel 1991c, §187 (p. 263); Hegel 2008, §188-189 (pp. 197-198).

the one hand, *Logik* and, on the other hand, *Realphilosophie* as divided into *Naturphilosophie* and *Geistesphilosophie* (i.e., the three divisions familiar in the form of the three volumes of the *Encyclopedia*, namely, *Logic*, *Philosophy of Nature*, and *Philosophy of Mind*). Stated roughly and quickly, my idea is that Hegel's three beginnings correspond approximately to the divisions of the Hegelian system as follows: metaphysical (*Logic*), material (*Philosophy of Nature*), and historical (*Philosophy of Mind*, including *Phenomenology*—both ontogenetic and phylogenetic histories are involved in mindedness and like-mindedness).

The *Phenomenology of Spirit*—this first systematic work of the mature Hegel defensibly can be read as a massive dialectical process-of-elimination argument in which all non-Hegelian presuppositions (embodied in the *Phenomenology*'s myriad figures/shapes of consciousness) dialectically eliminate (qua sublate) themselves—provides the pre-history leading up to the presuppositionless initiation of the *Logic*. Given both that Hegel is no metaphysical realist and that he distinguishes between the logical and the real (as per the division between *Logik* and *Realphilosophie*), the *Logic* then can be construed as spelling out the dialectical-speculative network of concepts and categories making possible all *Realphilosophie* precisely as knowledge of the Real (any and every knowing of Nature or Mind [als Geist] necessarily relies directly upon at least some of the constellations delineated in the *Logic*). However, this making possible is done not in the epistemological manner of Kant's subjectively idealist transcendental, but, instead, in the ontological fashion of Hegel's absolute idealist *Idee* (Idee) qua the identity-in-difference between the objectively real as well as subjectively ideal dimensions of concepts and categories (with, as I have shown already at some length, concepts and categories indeed being both objectively real as well as subjectively ideal for Hegel). Hence, the intelligibility of all things real, be they natural or mental (again, als geistige), is made possible by them always-already being formed in and of themselves along lines traced by the *Logic*.

Nonetheless, the structures and dynamics of the *Logic* do not magically float in the rarified air of a mysterious, eternal time-before-time (despite a famous Hegelian passage misleadingly suggesting this¹²¹). They exist only in and through the natural and spiritual realities

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121 Hegel 1969a, pp. 49-50.

that are themselves immanent realizations of logical concepts and categories. For Hegel, and pace metaphysical realism, the metaphysical by itself is not the real. Therefore, the Logic is a beginning strictly in the circumscribed sense of laying down the skeletal metaphysical abstractions serving as necessary conditions/ingredients for an ontology of intelligible being(s)—with this “-logy” formulated at a determinate point of spiritual history from the contextually situated standpoint of philosophy’s backwards glance (à la the Owl of Minerva) as itself invariably embodied in individual human creatures of nature (as well as culture). These qualifications I just now attached to the logical beginning of Hegel’s absolute idealism already hint at the different priorities belonging to the two fundamental dimensions of Realphilosophie, those of Natur und Geist.

One of the accomplishments of the Phenomenology of Spirit, Science of Logic, and Encyclopedia Logic taken together is that they permit Hegel to posit real beginnings both material/natural (as in Realphilosophie als Naturphilosophie) as well as historical/mental (as in Realphilosophie als Geistesphilosophie) in thoroughly non-dogmatic, post-critical ways. In particular, not only does Hegelian Logic make possible knowledge of the Real à la the Realphilosophie (as real knowledge¹²²)—it also argumentatively supports Hegel’s realism generally (by immanently critiquing such anti-realist options as Kantian transcendental idealism) and his beginning, at the start of the Philosophy of Nature, with space and time as objectively real specifically. The course of Hegel’s mature Logic begins with Being and ends with the transition to Nature (with the latter as external to thinking, including the thinking of/about thinking that is the Logic itself). This is significant, especially considering that Hegel, as I noted a while ago, proclaims the structure of his Logic to be circular, with the end reconnecting (somehow or other) with the beginning. Of course, the Logic initially gets underway with the attempt to start with Being from within pure thinking. Hence, its conclusion, as a neither temporal nor causal move from the Logical to the Real of Nature as an externality in excess of pure thinking, entails that the “onto-” in ontology really is to be found over and above a “-logy” alone, namely, in Natur an sich.

If I am right in reading the entire Logic as a series of false starts, then it becomes a failed ontology. However, surprisingly, its failure is epistemologically productive. Inaugurated without presuppositions

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122 Hegel 1977c, p. 3.

and set in motion with the self-induced dialectics of the attempt to begin with mere, sheer Being per se, the Logic keeps failing properly to begin. The sequence of failures to begin inexorably drives thought up to the point of thinking Nature’s externality, ready to do so equipped with the conceptual and categorial resources generated precisely by the sublimely, stunningly productive failures, as “determinate negations,”¹²³ constituting the full sweep of the Logic. With the Logic’s circularity, this means that Being, its false start, is truly recovered first as spatio-temporal objective reality (i.e., the start of Realphilosophie with Natur), an intelligible reality whose intelligibility is made possible by the Logic itself (as a metaphysical, but not yet real, beginning). Therefore, the Philosophy of Nature can be construed as furnishing a second beginning for Hegel’s System, that is, its material preconditions/presuppositions.

Finally, and as the deservedly renowned preface to Hegel’s 1821 Elements of the Philosophy of Right powerfully proposes, philosophy generally and Hegelian systematic, scientific philosophy specifically is invariably and inevitably a “child of its time,” namely, constructed from the perspective of the backwards glance of the Owl of Minerva.¹²⁴ In this sense, what I am here identifying as the third, historical beginning of Hegelian Wissenschaft, in addition to the other two beginnings metaphysical (with Logik) and material (with Naturphilosophie), enjoys the priority of embodying the spiritual-contextual starting points conditioning Hegel’s philosophy überhaupt. As the introductory “First Part” of a “System of Science,” the Phenomenology of Spirit, particularly with its glaringly prominent socio-historical components, already hints, well before 1821, that both Logik and Realphilosophie (i.e., the entirety of the encyclopedic nucleus of the System) are actual and possible only insofar as the history of human mindedness and like-mindedness has eventuated in Hegel-the-philosopher’s particular early-nineteenth-century European time and place.¹²⁵ However, although Hegel posits such conjunctural/situational presuppositions as (pre) conditions of his philosophy as well as philosophy tout court, he nonetheless avoids crudely and unreservedly reducing the philosophical to the historical. For instance, his own Logic, Philosophy of Nature, and

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123 Hegel 1977c, p. 36; Hegel 1969a, pp. 54-56, 106-107; Hegel 1991c, §82 (pp. 131-132).

124 Hegel 1991a, pp. 20-23.

125 Hegel 1977c, pp. 6-7; Hegel 1956, pp. 446-447; Hegel 1955b, pp. 546-548, 551-552.

large portions of the Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind are put forward as possessing at least a relative autonomy vis-à-vis their socio-historical catalysts and influences, with these portions' validity not simply rising and falling with the waxing and waning of given contextual circumstances.

Two fundamental questions are at stake in Žižek's recent disagreements with Pippin (and similar deflationists) over the non/anti-metaphysical Hegel: First, what is the true nature of beginning(s) for Hegel's philosophical framework? Second, how and why, in the current aftermath of deflationary variants of Hegelianism (especially Pippin's Kantianizing one), is anybody entitled to put forward a historical/dialectical materialist Hegel? As seen, I answer the first question differently than Žižek does. Whereas he locates a single Ur-beginning in the Logic's "Doctrine of Being" (more precisely, in "Determinate Being"/"Being-There" as preceded by the triad of Being-Nothing-Becoming) and Pippin does so within "The Doctrine of the Concept," I treat the Logic in toto as only one of three different yet equiprimordial beginnings, that is, as a metaphysical beginning distinct from equally indispensable material (as per Naturphilosophie) and historical (as per Geistesphilosophie) ones too. Furthermore, this move of mine, particularly by virtue of it restoring to Hegel's Realphilosophie equal standing with respect to Logik within his System as a whole, answers the second question by inverting it: How and why, in taking seriously Hegel's thoughts and texts, is anybody entitled to put forward an anti-materialist, anti-naturalist, and/or anti-realist (in a word, deflated) Hegel? In *Less Than Nothing* as well as throughout his still-unfolding oeuvre, Žižek indeed reads Hegel in this same spirit, clearly considering the material/natural and historical/mental Philosophy of the Real to be as essential to Hegel's philosophy as the Logic. However, not only does this exegetical approach require the sort of additional argumentative and textual support I have tried to provide in this intervention—some of Žižek's interpretive maneuvers with respect to Hegel (such as the beginning he claims to find in "The Doctrine of Being") are at odds with a globally consistent overall reading Hegel's System as a historical/dialectical materialism *avant la lettre*. As seen at the start of this essay, Žižek, immediately after claiming in *Less Than Nothing* that Hegel's System initially gets underway quite early in the Logic with the Being-there of Determinate Being, claims that there is a properly Hegelian materialist ontology. One thing I think I have managed to show here is that these two claims are in tension with each other and that Žižek would

be well advised to drop the former claim if he wants to hold onto the latter.

Deflationists might respond to all of the preceding by appealing to a distinction between historically accurate readings versus philosophically interesting reconstructions, identifying themselves as pursuing projects of the latter type. With this line of response, it is either assumed or asserted that much of the actual, factual Hegel of yore (for instance, the grand system-builder, the ambitious metaphysician, and the philosopher of nature) long ago ceased to be alive, relevant, or valid for later generations of readers and thinkers. Such deflationists take it for granted that the various and sundry post-metaphysical turns in the Continental and/or Analytic philosophical traditions are (or, at least, should be) assumed to be historical points of no return marking a trajectory of presumed intellectual development (or even progress); in this, they are neither sufficiently (self-)critical nor philosophically interesting. For them, the key questions are: Where does Hegel stand with respect to the present? What remains interesting or palatable in Hegel's philosophy judged by today's philosophical criteria and tastes? But, for anyone risking the encounter of a true engagement with a giant of the philosophical past such as Hegel (as a past which, echoing William Faulkner, is never even past) with as few (usually anachronistic) presuppositions as possible, the key questions always (also) are: Where does the present stand with respect to Hegel (or whichever member of the pantheon of the "mighty dead")? How would Hegel (or any other philosopher of the never-even-past past) judge today's philosophical criteria and tastes? That is to say, recognizing Hegel (or anyone else) as truly worthy of sustained attention in the present, as an interlocutor irreplaceable by other recent or current thinkers, ought to entail those conferring this recognition being willing and able to have their very present itself called into question and challenged by the object of this recognition. This amounts to a reversal of Žižek's question "Is it still possible to be a Hegelian today?": Is it still possible to be contemporary (i.e., to presume as well-founded today's established standards for judging Hegel's enduring value or lack thereof) in the face of an honest, thorough reckoning with Hegel himself in all his glorious philosophical untimeliness? Anything short of this reckoning signals a disrespectful underestimation throwing the doors wide open to the surreptitious replacement of Hegel with the ersatz of a dummy made for exploitation by post-Hegelian ventriloquists.

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Revisiting a singular materialism

(Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries. Philosophy's Perpetual War*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2013, pp. X+246)

Reviewed by Panagiotis Sotiris

Recently there has been a new interest in the work of Louis Althusser. In contrast to readings of his work from the second half of the 1990s that mainly focused on Althusser's posthumously published manuscripts from the 1980s with their imagery of a materialism of the encounter, this new interest has more to do with the totality of Althusser's work. This has been helped by developments in the publishing history of Althusser's texts. The recent translation of Althusser's seminal manuscript from 1969 *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*¹, from which Althusser composed the 1971 article on "Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses of the State", the publication of the 1972 course on Rousseau,² and of the *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non philosophes (Initiation to Philosophy for the non philosophers)*,³

have offered new insights to Althusser's work.

In this sense, Warren Montag's book represents an important development. It follows Montag's important contributions to the Althusserian literature in the past years,⁴ which brought forward important aspects of Althusser's work such as the importance of singularity, a particular variety of nominalism as opposed to classical criticisms of Althusser as a nominalist. In particular, Montag has stressed the importance of Althusser's distancing from structuralism in the second half of the 1960s, and his turn towards a more Spinozist approach (Montag is also one of the most important contributors to contemporary Spinoza debates⁵). Montag's interventions have been important in highlighting Althusser's distinct quest for a materialism of singular practices and overdetermination.

The book that we are reviewing here attempts to deal with Althusser's complex relation with his theoretical contemporaries. It begins with taking Althusser's 1962-63 seminar on the origins of structuralism as a reference point. Montag indeed offers here an important breakthrough since, in contrast to the traditional im-

.....
¹ Althusser 2014.

² Althusser 2012.

³ Althusser 2014a.

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⁴ Montag 1991; 1998; 2003.

⁵ Montag 1999; Montag and Stolze (eds.) 1997.

age of a structuralist Althusser of the early 1960s, a different image emerges of Althusser engaging in a double critique of both idealist subjectivism but also of idealist formalism, both strands associated with different theoretical options both coming from phenomenology. This is based upon a careful reading of the entire theoretical and political conjuncture of French philosophy in the post WWII period. In this reading, the particularly French tradition of non-positivist epistemology, exemplified in Jean Cavaillès's call for a philosophy of the concept, coming not from traditional rationalism, but also from Spinozism,⁶ emerges as an answer to the shortcomings of both traditional metaphysics but also phenomenology. Montag, also, points to the importance of Macherey's reading of Canguilhem as an attempt towards a philosophy of the concept. Moreover, Montag points to the importance of Althusser's criticism of Derrida's attempt towards a critique of metaphysics through a reading of Husserl as it was expressed in Derrida's introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*.⁷ Althusser finds, especially, in the writings of Cavailles and Canguilhem, a radical critique of every philosophy of

origin. Consequently, Althusser's endeavor emerges not only as a non-structuralist project but also as a broader critique of idealist tendencies than traditional histories of his thought tend to suggest. Althusser's position seems like a more general critique of every philosophy of origin and consciousness. In particular, the critique of structuralism emerges as exactly a critique of a particular form of formalism associated with idealist philosophies of conscience. Montag stresses that for Althusser Levy-Strauss' work was not so much a critique of phenomenology but a variation of the same idealist problematic. Moreover, Montag provides ample evidence of the theoretical dialogue and relations between structural linguistics and phenomenology, in contrast to traditional histories of structuralism. He also points to the importance of humanism for certain varieties of structuralism and 'mathematical formalism', the humanism that is exactly the target of Althusser's anti-humanist critique. This gives a broader scope to Althusser's reference to the need to distinguish between Levy-Strauss's research and the philosophy attached to it.

Montag suggests that Lucien Sebag's *Marxisme et Structuralisme*⁸ is an example of the possibility to have this rapprochement between

.....
6 Cavaillès 1960.

7 Derrida 1989.

.....
8 Sebag 1965.

structuralism and historicist/humanist Marxism. This book by a militant Marxist who in his short life managed to engage in political battles but also ethnographical studies and a dialogue with Lacanian psychoanalysis, is indeed of great interest. It offers a potential coupling of Marxism and structuralist analysis, based on humanist and historicist Marxism and especially the theoretical direction offered by Lukács. Sebag offers a Marxist version of the position, implicit in many of Levy-Strauss texts that what makes possible a structural analysis as a grammar of social relations is exactly the possibility to think of the human mind as common origin.

For Montag, eventually it was not so much Althusser but Derrida that stressed the contradictory co-existence of two conceptions of structures and structurality in the work of Levy-Strauss, one metaphysical and one non-metaphysical. This non-metaphysical conception of structurality in Derrida takes the form of a 'decentered structure' (p. 72) which for Montag is exactly a point of convergence between Althusser and Derrida.⁹

Montag moves from Althusser's confrontation with structuralism to the very concept of

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9 Montag refers especially to Derrida's 1967 text 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' included in *Writing and Difference* (Derrida 2001).

structure within Althusser's own texts. He refers to an important aspect of Althusser's theoretical development – and an aspect the importance of which Montag has stressed repeatedly – namely role played by Macherey's criticism of whatever 'structuralist' could be found in Althusser's work and in particular of any conception of a 'latent structure'. Montag shows how Macherey's intervention led Althusser to excise certain passages from his contributions for the second edition of *Reading Capital*. He also stresses the importance of Macherey's own *Theory of Literary Production*¹⁰, a book that represents a very important critique of 'structuralism'. For Macherey there is no point in seeking a hidden structure as 'abstract intention' and internal necessity. In contrast to such a false interiority is it important to treat the text as surface but also as a surface marked by lack and absences. Consequently, the essential concept of analysis should not be structure but *décalage*.

Montag offers a very important reading of the passages that Althusser excised from *Reading Capital*. These are the passages that in the most explicit way point towards a conception of 'latent' structures, 'anterior to a given text [...] endowing the text with a

depth beneath the surface, the two-level space that allows the manifest to conceal the latent' (p. 83). Without this reference to a latent structure, the text emerges as 'pure surface' with a 'real, irreducible complexity' (p. 84). For Montag there are certain points in Althusser's theoretical endeavor that mark his distancing from any form of structuralist formalism: the emphasis on singularity and what Montag has repeatedly referred to as Althusser's nominalism. It is exactly these aspects that make necessary a new form of causality that is neither linear/transitive nor expressive. For Montag the very notion of a structural causality, expressed in Althusser's insistence of the 'presence of a structure in its effects' is a move away from Descartes, Leibniz, Hegel and even Marx towards Spinoza and a conception of immanent causality. Montag through a very careful and detail textual analysis of the omitted passages from *Reading Capital*¹¹ brings forward the tension inherent in the very notion of structural causality. For Montag the two formulas used by Althusser, in some cases as synonyms, namely the notion that the structure is 'present in its effects' and 'exists in its effects', are in fact contrasting.

11 The omitted passages can be found in the French full edition of *Lire le Capital* (Althusser et al. 1996).

The first can lead to a conception of a latent structure and the second is closer to an immanentist conception of the conjunction of singular entities' (p. 90).

For Montag it is Macherey's rejection of any conception of a structured whole in favour of a Spinozist conception of an encounter between singularities, that offers a way out of the problems associated with the notion of the structure. This does not mean the notion in 'structure', in this non-formalist conception is useless. Rather, the notion of the structure

allows the conjuncture to be thought of not as the negativity of indeterminacy, as the random encounter of primary elements that themselves require no further explanation than the positing of their irreducibility, but rather as determinate singularities both composed of and composing other singularities, even as they possess their own singular actual essence. (p. 93).

According to Montag, Althusser's attempt to redefine the materialist dialectic in the essays included in *For Marx* moves exactly towards a theorization of how singular elements combine into new larger singular entities. After 1965, Althusser continued to elaborate upon this notion of an encounter of singularities, both through an

elaboration upon Spinozist themes but also through a critique of any identification of the structure with the symbolic exemplified in his exchanges with Deleuze.¹²

Montag then turns to Althusser's theory of ideology. Montag begins by a reading of Althusser's 1964 'Marxism and Humanism' essay in *For Marx*, a reading that attempts to avoid treating it in a teleological fashion as the first form of Althusser's later elaborations upon ideology and ideological apparatuses of the State. Althusser in this text characterized humanism as ideological, in the sense that it refers to existing realities but does not offer the means to know them in the sense that science offers the possibility of knowledge. Montag analyses Althusser's definition of ideology as 'a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society'¹³. Montag stresses the notion of a system possessing its own logic and rigor proper to it, but at the same time he insists that Althusser's reference to 'representations' (images, myths, ideas or concepts) distances this position from a 'structuralist' po-

12 See Stolze 1998 for this dialogue.

13 Althusser 1969, p.231.

sition. At the same time, the very notion of ideology as inadequate representation is not defined in an exhaustive way since Althusser moves on the function of ideology. Montag stresses the importance of the necessary character of ideology for any given society, 'no society [...] can exist outside ideology' (p. 110). Therefore, ideology is not something that is invented; rather it is secreted by society as a totality, and represents the necessary decentering of consciousness. However, for Montag this is not the main argument. More important is Althusser's tendency to treat ideology in material terms, exemplified in the recurring reference to the *lived* experience, although there is a resemblance between this reference and aspects of phenomenological Marxism. For Montag, even if Althusser had in mind the references to lived experience in phenomenological Marxism, in reality he inscribes both conscience and lived experience in a different problematic that links consciousness to attitude and behavior. For Montag this 'is not only to make ideology an affair of bodies rather than minds, but it is to materialize it altogether' (p. 117).

Montag then moves towards the relation between Althusser and Lacan. Montag offers a close reading of Althusser's seminar

presentations on psychoanalysis¹⁴ and, in particular, Althusser's appreciation of Lacan's insistence that psychoanalysis is not reducible to either biology or philosophy. He also opposes any attempt to incorporate psychoanalysis into some sort of a philosophy of consciousness or intersubjectivity and it is there that Althusser finds the importance of Lacan's critique of ego-psychology. Montag also points to the importance of a critique of the subject for Althusser and his political conception of the process of subjection. He also links this to the question of subject of truth as a central question of the political philosophy of modernity, expressed in the question why should the subject of truth take the form of an ego (p. 127). For Montag it is important that Althusser points to the direction of Spinoza stressing the fact that in Spinoza the imaginary "exists outside of and prior to the mind of the individual" (p. 129). For Montag, Althusser in this reading of Spinoza as part of his confrontation with psychoanalysis not only desubjectifies the imaginary but also refuses to it any sense of ideality. This takes place in a lecture that in the end dealt not so much with Lacan but more with the confrontation between Descartes and Spinoza, and which ends by Althusser

insisting that in Spinoza one can find a reference to the imaginary as a social structure that necessarily produces a subject in order to exist.¹⁵

Montag then turns to another important text by Althusser, the unpublished 'Three Notes on the theory of discourse'.¹⁶ This is an important transitory text, because it was Althusser's last effort to think various questions (theory of ideology, theory of the unconscious, theory of scientificity) in terms of a 'general' theory. In light of this attempt, the theory of the unconscious would be a regional theory of a general theory of discourse. According to Montag, this conception of the unconscious as a discourse offers to Althusser the possibility to 'abandon the concepts whose use by others he found so unsatisfactory' (p. 132), discourse being thought of in a more general sense than the one used in linguistics. However, as Montag points, the opposition between discourse and practice means that Althusser in his effort to develop a theory of ideology, in contrast to any theory of consciousness, again creates some form of dualism:.. Moreover, in the end of the Three Notes Althusser has modified his initial position

¹⁵ Althusser 1996, pp. 119-120.

¹⁶ In Althusser 2003.

¹⁴ Althusser 1996.

regarding the relation between discourse and subject: not all discourse 'produce' a subject effect, this is the effect of ideological discourse alone. For Montag the important aspect of this formulation is Althusser's reference to the subject possessing 'a structure of specular centering [...] the empirical subject duplicated by a transcendental subject, the man-subject by God etc'.¹⁷ Montag then points towards Althusser's 1967 manuscript on Feuerbach¹⁸ as an elaboration of these points, where he thinks that we can find elements of an elaboration of this theoretical schema of the subject/Subject relation. In this sense, Althusser, according to Montag, reverses the traditional reading of Feuerbach, since in reality it is not human subjects that are at the centre, but the Subject, in this case God, which makes possible this specular relation of recognition. Moreover, Montag points to the introduction in the 'Three Notes' of the notion of ideological interpellation of individuals into subjects. Montag notes the particular signification of interpellation, which points exactly to subjects being endowed with the 'status of a moral and legal subject' (p. 137). However, there are contradictions in Al-

¹⁷ Althusser 2003, p. 50.

¹⁸ In Althusser 2003.

thusser's attempt to theorize ideological interpellation in the 'Three Notes...', namely 'the contradiction between a notion of interiority as constituted from the outside and a notion of interiority that precedes and founds the outside' (p. 138.). Despite this contradiction, Montag thinks that Althusser's attempt to think a potential theory of unconscious that excludes any theory of consciousness is also a way to rethink ideological interpellation beyond this contradiction of a Subject that somehow pre-exists the subject. Consequently, 'it is no longer possible to conceive of ideology as a discourse that interpellates someone who already exists to recognize himself in the specular image and respond to the summons of the Subject' (p. 140).

Montag then turns to Althusser's elaborations in the 1969 manuscript *Sur la Reproduction*.¹⁹ He points to the importance of a theory ideology in the attempt to answer the question how the reproduction of the relations of production is secured (p. 143). For Montag, Althusser's emphasis on the materiality of ideological state apparatuses is very important because it makes 'visible the way in which the very notion of consent is inextricably bound up with the forms of subjection characteristic

¹⁹ See Althusser 2014 for the English translation.

of capitalist societies' (p. 145). The important aspect has to do with the material existence of ideology in apparatus, and he stresses the reference to existence instead of realization, which means that ideology cannot exist external to its material form, suggest a form of immanence of ideology in its apparatuses and their practices. For Montag this suggests a conception of ideology that is beyond any form of interiority; rather it points to a theory of ideology as a theory of the materiality of practices, action, behaviors, discourses. And this transforms the very notion of ideology as representation since 'we must understand "represent" here as a transformation, a reworking and refashioning, the product of which is as real and material as that which was transformed' (p. 155). Moreover, such a conception moves beyond the coercion/consent dualism since it forces us to 'acknowledge the "consubstantiality" of force and persuasion' (p. 158). For Montag, the full version of the manuscript, with its references to struggles and the potential fragility of the ISAs, lacks the abstract character of the published essay that could justify accusation of 'functionalism'. The evolution of Althusser had to do with both his theoretical elaboration but also with a conjuncture of struggles.

For Montag such a reading of a materialist theory of ideol-

ogy can also help us revisit the potential dialogue between the conceptions of Althusser and Foucault. He stresses how Foucault's arguments in *Discipline and Punish* underscore 'the way in which the arguments that comprise the thesis "ideology has a materialist existence" appear to call into question the distinction between violence and ideology (understood in turn as an opposition of force and consent)' (p. 162). In this sense, the materiality of technologies of bodies in Foucault is also a way to rethink what Althusser designated as the materiality of ideology and the interpellation of individuals as subjects by ideology. For Montag, this 'history of the body, of the individual itself' is 'an entire dimension that Althusser's essay unwittingly presupposes' (p. 166), and in this sense he 'described the material conditions of interpellation' (p. 166). Revisiting Foucault's critique of Althusser's theory of ideology, he points that their common use of allegories (the policeman 'hailing' the subject in the case of Althusser, Panopticon in the case of Foucault) points to their confrontation with the challenge of theorizing ideology beyond any theory of consciousness.

The third part of the book returns to Althusser's later texts on aleatory materialism and in particular his text on 'The Underground Current of the Materialism

of the Encounter'.²⁰ He points to the importance of chronology in Althusser's genealogy of aleatory materialism and especially to Althusser's reference to the importance of the void in Spinoza and in particular to Althusser's reading of parallelism in Spinoza. According to Montag, this not a misreading but has to do with the importance the notion of the void has in all of Althusser's work which must be related to Althusser's insistence on philosophy not having a proper object but also, and more importantly, to the every nothingness that is the origin. This importance of non-origin, as non-encounter, is an important part of Althusser's non-teleological conception of a materialism of the encounter. Moreover, Montag points also to another unnoticed theme in Althusser's text: the fact that Althusser refers to falling atoms in Epicurus and Lucretius as opposed to the reference in the original texts to moving, something that he attributes to Althusser trying to stress the non-finalism of his position. For Montag, through a parallel reading of Derrida and Heidegger, this implies '[t]he world is thus falling: it has been given (away), dealt (out), sent, abandoned, all actions that the thesis of the primacy of absence over presence renders

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²⁰ In Althusser 2006.

irreducible'. Consequently it is important to think of the non-world that precedes the world because 'it is precisely in the nothing that precedes what is that philosophy dwells, the eternal void in relation to which being is mere rain' (p. 184). However, Montag thinks that there is also another sense of the void, which is not the void as origin, but rather a conception a void immanent in the encounter. In this reading, the 'void that philosophy makes would not be a contestation of the real, as if it were external to that which it represents, but rather is one of its effects, a means by which it frees itself of origins and ends in order to become the infinite diversity it is, the indissociable simultaneity of thought and action' (p. 188). Moreover, this reference to the void is also an expression of Althusser's attempt to think of another time, not the time 'of the encounter that strikes like lightning in the void', but rather the empty time of 'waiting in vain for a future that does not arrive late or on time' (p. 189), the time of the event that never comes, the time of crisis of revolutionary politics.

The book ends with a look at one of Althusser's early writings, a text from 'Althusser before Althusser', 'The International of Decent Feelings'.²¹ This text coming from 1946, from the period

that Althusser was moving politically towards communist militancy while remaining a catholic. A virulent text it opposes a certain kind of mentality that emerged after WWII, exemplified in intellectuals like Malraux, Camus or Marcel who tried to propose the reunification of human community in terms of an answer to the fear of the post-WWII world and of a certain 'universalization of guilt' (p. 198). Montag stresses the contradiction induced in Althusser's argument by him sharing aspects of a Christian eschatology, and consequently of an 'end'. At the same time, he shows, how to this apocalyptic panic Althusser opposes the possibility that the proletariat, who is actually, now, experiencing poverty and hunger, can overcome the possibility of such an apocalyptic end, by creating the condition of its own liberation, first of all as a necessary liberation from the prison of fear.

Montag's afterword brings forward both the difficulty and the challenge and fascination associated with trying to retrace Althusser's theoretical adventure. For Montag if Althusser

remains ungraspable, it is because there is something new, a beginning, rupture there, not a new doctrine, a new theory of history or society, but simply a new way of inhabiting philosophy, that

is, the philosophical conjuncture, that makes visible the lines of force that constitute it, opening the possibility of change. Althusser, too, it appears, has slipped away: he has disappeared into his intervention, a line of demarcation that is not even a line, the emptiness of a distance taken, a cause that exists only in its effects, the shattering of obstacles that opens new possibilities.

The above presentation makes more than obvious the importance of Montag's book. It is not just the breadth and scope of this attempt to place Althusser in the actual conditions of his dialogue and complex relationship to his theoretical contemporaries. It is also Montag's own attempt to read Althusser's endeavor as an attempt towards a highly original form of materialism, in opposition to any form of metaphysics and teleology. This materialism opposes any form of surface/depth dualism, rests upon immanence, and, in a Spinozist manner, refers to the encounters and articulations between singular essences. In this sense, Althusser comes out not as a 'structuralist' but rather as a radical critique of all forms of idealism, including the humanism and formalism inherent in important aspects of what we traditionally tend to treat as 'structuralism'. The same goes for Montag's elabo-

ration on questions of ideology where he brings forward how Althusser distances himself from any theory of consciousness in favor of a materialist theory of practices, bodies and apparatuses. Moreover, such an approach offers a way to rethink Althusser's late writings. The conception of a materialism of the encounter emerges as a philosophical tendency that runs through most of Althusser's work and not an expression of Althusser 'turn' in his post 1980 isolation, in contrast a some part of the Althusserian literature in the 1990s. Therefore, it is a book that is an indispensable reading for any attempt to approach Althusser's work.

Regarding potential points of criticism of the book, I would like to suggest two points. They are not points of disagreement; rather they are research directions that in my opinion need to be further developed. On the one hand, the relation between Althusser's philosophy and politics must be stressed. We have now a much better apprehension of Althusser's confrontation with the notion of the encounter and, in general, of his attempt towards a non metaphysical and non teleological materialism of singularity, contingency and conjuncture, during a large part of his theoretical trajectory. We have to relate this to Althusser's attempt towards a left-wing critique of the

reformism and strategic impasse of western communist parties, a political position he held from the mid-1960s onwards. The materialism of the encounter is not simply an opposition to metaphysics or a (non) ontological position; above all it is a reference to the constant effectivity of class antagonism, the singular nature of all conjunctures, and the overdetermined character of political practices. Consequently, it is intrinsically linked to any attempt to rethink the potential for revolutionary politics. In the 1970s the Althusser of the encounter is also the Althusser of the quest for a revolutionary renewal of communist strategy.

On the other hand, I think that more attention needs to be placed upon the emphasis on the reproduction of social relations of production through the intervention of material apparatuses and in particular the Ideological State Apparatuses. Montag rightly points to Althusser's gradual turn towards a more materialist conception of ideological interpellation. However, I think there is also a more general theoretical position articulated in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*²². If there is no dialectic of latent structures – surface social forms and if all social practices, relations and forms all take place at the same 'plane of im-

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22 Althusser 2014.

manence', then how is social reproduction possible? Althusser's answer is that this is not the result of deeper structures operating 'behind the backs' of social agents, but of material apparatuses that make sure the repetition of practices, rituals, interpellations, at the same time that they are traversed by the constant effectivity of class antagonism. In this sense, when we take as starting points the causal primacy of class struggle and the primacy of relations of production over productive forces, then the very notion of the apparatuses acquires a broader analytical and philosophical dimension. This is the strategic importance of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* in Althusser's endeavor.

However, these are just points to enlarge the scope of research on Althusser. Moreover, books such as the one Warrant Montag has written can help these debates. Warren Montag has done an impressive attempt to bring forward the materialism of Althusser's endeavor. This is a reason for this important book to be read and discussed.

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Socializing Hope: Bloch and Beyond

The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia / Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek (eds.) / Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Ivan Boldyrev

The philosophy of Ernst Bloch, that once seemed an obscure remnant of German radical thinking, is currently entering a vibrant moment of scholarly interest and metaphysical enquiry. Nothing could provide a better case for this claim than the *Privatization of Hope*, the new volume edited by Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek. Before discussing the book itself it might be helpful to address the current status of Bloch's reception.

First, there is still a significant bundle of philological work to do – bringing to light the unpublished manuscripts, translating the texts previously available only in German, providing the contexts and filling the important, intellectually significant gaps both in Bloch's biography and in the hermeneutics of his texts. Second, Bloch's writings are singular in their suggestive and powerful style. Bloch saw himself as a philosopher of the Expressionist generation – his

texts engage the readers and are only comprehensible in view of this dynamic and poetic engagement. That is why I find it still promising to look at the *form* of utopian thinking both in historical and speculative way. Finally, Bloch's philosophy itself, as a never-to-be-finished project of utopian imagination, as an ontology of the Not-Yet, messianic philosophy of history or aesthetics of pre-appearance, should concern us here and now, as something to be hinted at, defended, taken up, developed, but also criticized and consciously abandoned.

These tasks are not incompatible. *Privatization of Hope* is mainly oriented towards the last one, but pays tribute to the others by exploring Bloch's style (Johan Siebers, David Miller) and contexts (Roland Boer, Ruth Levitas). This collection of voices is quite heterogeneous, and a reader is certainly not guided by any single general theme, but several most prominent aspects can be easily discerned. While admitting an obvious oversimplification, I would, however, locate them under general headings: ontology, politics, and aesthetics.¹

Bloch's metaphysical project

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¹ Needless to say, these topics overlap with each other and within particular contributions. This simple structure is needed only as a ladder to be thrown away once we get an overall intuition of what Bloch's philosophy is about.

is interpreted in the book as an ontology of the material. This reflects the risk contemporary thought takes upon itself in an attempt to think the world (or 'reality') as a whole. Bloch scholars explore the challenge of new materialist philosophies by reclaiming the imminent dialectics at their core, as demanded by Catherine Moir, by referring to contemporary versions of anti-(or post)humanism (Vincent Geoghegan), and by envisaging the parallel developments in the contemporary thought (Thompson and Wayne Hudson).

Bloch's philosophy of nature, developed mainly in the 1930s but conceived much earlier, stressed the inherent dynamics and utopian subjectivity in the core of material universe. As Moir shows convincingly, this reconsideration of older themes – stemming in part from Böhme and Schelling – can be usefully applied to the internal difficulties of 'speculative realism' (of the sort advocated by Quentin Meillassoux) and resolve its tendencies to transcendentalism and abstract anti-humanism by providing a dialectical account of *natura naturans* and thus bringing the agency and creativity back to the natural realm.² This move is radical

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² Still more parallels and possible interlocutors for Bloch's ontology are provided by Hudson (who is able to see the potential of associating Bloch, among others, with Roy Bhaskar's critical realism and the philosophies

in admitting both that everything in the world we have can be otherwise *and* that no rational necessity is underlying this open process. It can have a clear emancipating message as demonstrated by Geoghegan: we get a new vision of humanity by contemplating its limits. This stance can also be reinterpreted in a quite pragmatic manner, as Rainer Zimmermann proposes, by turning from utopian (as, allegedly, laden with internal contradictions) to *metopian* worlds (as possible - virtual – realities), from a complete existential overturn to the structural change in the organization of reality. Zimmermann draws on some recent attempts to conceptualize possible worlds in science fiction and mathematical topos theory and traces their common theme: to explore the potentialities of creating the new with/in language. This technological grasp of utopian theme is interesting not just in the consequences to be expected, but also as particular social practices to be studied. Francesca Vidal and Welf Schröter argue that the utopian perspective can become part of our own everyday life in the virtual realities of contemporary working relations that differ from traditional contexts and require a new social doctrine, going beyond

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of Bergson and Deleuze) and Thompson (who draws upon Lacan, Badiou and Žižek).

Marxism in order to deal with the new ways of oppression, exploitation, and emancipation – a doctrine in which Bloch's philosophy will definitely play a significant role.

Most troubling in Blochian accounts of radically incomplete reality is their version of teleology that, as Thompson suggests in the introduction (p. 7), goes beyond a simple divide between full contingency and full determination, splitting (and at the same time dialectically integrating) the world into the infinity of moments each creating its own *telos*. But how can this multitude of the utopian new stay meaningful, how can hope keep its eternal spring? How to be faithful to the utopian *telos* without relapsing into teleology (cf. p. 210)?

And this is precisely what Bloch invites us to think – to deal with 'the existence of the inexistent' (p. 92), to get a grip on the shaky phenomena of utopian excess, of 'something's missing', to walk tall in the vague and deceptive realm of hope, in the (sometimes unbearable) darkness of the present. In a remarkable twist, Hudson suggests that this project should be seen as instituting the more intricate realist version of rationality (p. 24) that would eventually correct the relativist and voluntarist bias in the philosophy of the New Left (p. 31). This interesting promise, however, remains only a promise in his contribution, for only too

general allusions to Hudson's own project are given – 'Being-Not-Enough' sadly replacing the glorious 'Not-Yet.'

General ontological difficulties are best resolved by rendering them politically meaningful. This *political* aspect of the book is also usefully introduced by Thompson who shows how important a pragmatist, performative moment is for Bloch's project. Utopia is something we are creating right now, it is always in the making and requires our active participation. This is further developed by Hudson – who argues that utopian philosophy is constructive since utopia permeates our actuality – and by Siebers reminding us that 'history itself is made in and by the promise of the eschaton' (p. 63). They both emphasize the inherent normativity of Bloch's discourse, the tendency to preach which is, importantly, quite explicit and thereby challenging for contemporary thinking, all-too immersed in the overwhelming suspicion towards any dreams and 'warm' images of emancipation.

This outspoken normativity distinguishes Bloch from the pessimism and melancholy of philosophical critique – he does not merely embrace a more 'positive' worldview or more sanguine emotions, but rather gives an ontological index to the 'militant optimism'

of hope. This is nicely formulated by Thompson who shows that Bloch overcomes (or sublates) the traditional ideology critique by vindicating 'failure, mistake, perversion, and distortion [as] essential to the human project' (p. 85). Bloch's theory of non-synchronicity (laid out primarily in the 1930s in the *Heritage of Our Times*) is also implied when Thompson posits that 'the symbolization of change... has to be "unveiled" but with as much, if not more, attention paid to the veil as to the face which is covered' (p. 86).

This is, I argue, one of the most significant messages of Bloch's political philosophy today. Instead of debunking and renouncing ideology altogether, one has to recognize in it this utopian excess, the unfulfilled promises of the past (also invoked by Žižek in his preface). Boer illustrates this by recalling Bloch's critique of Robert Bultmann's theology. Bultmann wanted to free theological discourse from myth, while Bloch demonstrated the liberating potential of mythology and could not dispense with myth altogether. Boer argues that revealing subversive elements of religion is something we have to retain from Bloch's utopian thinking. Not only theology, I would add, but also literature, history, social science can be subject to utopian hermeneutics which, in its overt partiality, should be open and free

from prejudice. A cultural critic too often proceeds with strict separations Bloch wants to avoid. Bloch always looked for the spirit of heterodoxy as a wind of revolution in the *Schein* of symbolic forms. This was, perhaps unwittingly, the impulse behind much of Marxist and feminist criticism or cultural studies. It is thus not a coincidence that, as Caitríona Ní Dhúill shows, despite major differences Bloch's work can be fruitfully reconfigured in view of contemporary feminist critiques. In particular, Bloch's own 'truth of gender' trope, as Ní Dhúill calls it, as well as his appeal to the 'humanization of nature' can be strategically important in envisioning alternatives to existing orders. The call to authenticity can have emancipatory potential and, like every impulse of utopian energy, also implies the risk of becoming oppressive (p. 152). This is similar to the Platonic *pharmakos* or the Biblical serpent that contains 'both poison and healing' (p. 194), as Frances Daly indicates. Bloch's dialectical perspective, his commitment to radical democracy and the quest for alternatives may prove relevant even in those contexts in which his own position seems outdated and opaque.

Bloch's political ideas should, however, be subject to critique far wider than particular tensions concerning his views on

gender. Henk de Berg offers, in a deliberately provocative manner, eleven theses that should 'unlearn how to hope.' Of course he does not mean it literally. What he provides is, rather, a liberal/conservative alternative to the leftist thought, somehow associating Bloch's political philosophy with these more general picture. In fact, the arguments de Berg proposes could be traced back not only to the writings of the 'Ritter School' to which he explicitly refers, but, closer to our context, to Helmut Schelsky's critique of Bloch's political stance. But, unlike Schelsky (whose arguments are also often problematic), de Berg only roughly relates the position he criticizes to Bloch's views, his critique is thus too general and misses the point. I do not want to claim that nothing from what de Berg attributes to Bloch cannot be found in Bloch's texts, moreover, one readily finds some passages that should be honestly criticized in a merciless manner and from any reasonable political standpoint. But I do claim that precisely what is distinct about Bloch's political philosophy – his preoccupation with existential and utopian meanings of the everyday and his openness towards 'superstructure' as well as, particularly, non-Marxist thinking – is missing in de Berg's account. What, however, makes de

Berg a Blochian³ (and, somehow, a Marxist) is his belief that the real change of capitalism is deeply immanent and should emerge from the latent unrest within capitalist society and not from some totally external force which would overthrow the existing injustice.

The power of utopian politics lies in the change of perspective and in the new opportunities to universalize. On the one hand, once we recognize utopian elements in a given social order or discursive formations, they cease to weigh upon us, and gain a positive meaning as premonition of the future adequacy – in the best tradition of Marxian dialectics! On the other hand, any discourse, any form of thought or action is allowed to participate in the utopian process, this is the radical democracy of Bloch's vision we have to reconsider today.

But how can we hold true to this promise? I would argue that one of the many possible answers is to reflect upon Bloch's *aesthetics*. This would amount to a double movement of exploration and participation. Bloch's texts, in this respect, are exquisite machines of estrangement, not only provoking us to think, but also inviting to

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3 I mean the later work, not the Spirit of Utopia that is still ambiguous on the transcendence of the Messianic.

witness the emergence of the new. This double structure is reproduced in many studies, including those from the *Privatization of Hope*, when discussion of Bloch's poetics as a reflective discipline merges with poetics of his texts.

Thus, Miller considers Bloch's philosophy as a kind of writing and stresses the disturbing effects of his style precluding any form of finite understanding or reception. For Miller, to write utopia is to allegorize, to confront and superpose the literal and the figural, the cold and the warm.

This general ambiguity of the utopian is also accounted for by Siebers. On his view, Bloch's thinking evades full verbal articulation and becomes *dramatic*, its style is something shown and enacted, but not said (p. 68). Bloch's prose seems indeed to be a struggle to find an expression, to bring to light the second – always obscure – dimension, the hidden core of things, 'a different system of reality that exists as the shadowy and veiled counterpart to the everyday world of habitual experience', as Miller puts it (p. 206). The unavailability of such an expression becomes constitutive of the utopian philosophy as such. Words are inadequate, since 'the inconstruable origin of discursiveness' (p. 68) still lies ahead. And here Siebers is perfectly right that the most adequate form for the literary

engagement with this experience is that of the essay. The only claim I cannot fully share is that one has to possess 'personal access to the type of experience of an absolute question Bloch starts with' (p. 71) in order to understand him at all. Although Bloch does suggest that certain kinds of experience must be in place in order to enter philosophical thinking, and he does try to elicit this experience within the practice of reading, I would tend to see it as a highly uncertain process. There can be many ways to enter Bloch's philosophy, and all of them might once be adequate to it.

Bloch himself, however, tended to specifically appreciate music as such a way. Levitas explores Bloch's musical philosophy and thereby helpfully contributes to the topic indispensable for understanding his aesthetics. Music is the most appropriate medium to enact the new, it communicates us the intensity of time, of historical time – to become a vehicle of revolution. In fact, an important message of Levitas' contribution is to show how critical were particular historical and scenic contexts for Bloch's interpretations of music. The effect of utopian thinking has to be paralleled with the effect of particular musical performances, philosophy and music are entangled in the common movement of historical time, time we listen to.

Now, what is the bottom line and is there one? Apparently, the merit of this volume is that it approaches Bloch's thinking from very different perspectives, and often in an ingenious way. I would not stage Bloch as 'irregular' or incommensurable, as Hudson seems to suggest (p. 23). For, as Hudson himself shows, Bloch's singularity is susceptible neither to the mere historical classification nor to the notorious emphasis on 'uniqueness.' Rather, one should only welcome the multiplicity of discourses inspired by Bloch and inspiring us to follow the appeal of hope and to venture beyond.

However, this should not be an 'economic' way of working with texts by exploiting them in order to extract and simply augment one's symbolic capital. Bloch's philosophy resists such appropriation, it is excessive in its generosity and, moreover, always leaves something unsaid, as a utopian trace forbidding to draw up a final balance. "A good story belongs to all of us,"⁴ it is not to be privatized, one cannot gain credit for it and expect a guaranteed return. Bloch is reported to be a fantastic narrator who kept in memory all the characters of Karl May, but what he shared with us is not only the diversity of utopian dreams, but also the human sense of lack,

incoherence, bewilderment, and unawareness to which all of us are exposed. By thinking we transgress, but the limit is still here, the night of ultimate death, or zero-point, as Daly proposes to call it, still threatens us. What we have to do is to reveal this coming to the limit and to share it, as once suggested by Jean-Luc Nancy. Utopian community, for all its productivity, is inoperative, because it faces absolute contingency. Every confidence will be ruined and every hope frustrated. But this utopian lack can overcome the fragmentation of desires by creating new dimensions of sociality. With our private hopes and fears, we all are living through the condition of fragility and uncertainty, something that will – in whatever form – be present in any community to come.

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⁴ Bloch 2006, p. 96

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