

The politics of Alienation and Separation: From Hegel to Marx... and Back

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to reconsider the relation between Marx and Hegel. In doing so, it takes on two crucial concepts that determine this rather complicated relation: that of alienation and separation. In order to discuss and develop the Marx-Hegel relation, the present paper engages with Lacan, Lukacs, Lenin and other theorists.

Keywords: Hegel, alienation, Marx, Lacan, separation

Alienation, Constitutive and Constituted

The topic of alienation plays a central role in so-called “warm” humanist Marxism. To put it briefly, humanist Marxism remains stuck within the confines of the abstract opposition of mechanism and organism, i.e., its vision of overcoming alienation remains that of the early Romantic Hegel. As such, it does not provide a sufficient reply to the “cold” Stalinist orthodoxy – it’s not a solution but part of the problem. It is here that Lacan’s intervention is crucial: it enables us to break out of the alternative between “warm” humanist Marxism which sees the main task of the revolutionary process in the overcoming of alienation and the establishment of a transparent society of free individuals, and the “cold” universe of dialectical and historical materialism with its “objective laws of history,” a world in which there is no place for concepts like alienation. Lacan also asserts a fundamental alienation of the human subject, an alienation which is constitutive of being-human, the alienation in the symbolic order: a human subject is not only a speaking being but, more radically, a being spoken, traversed by language, its truth lies outside itself, in the decentered symbolic order which forever eludes human control; every dream - of “appropriating” this alienated symbolic substance, of subordinating it to human subjectivity - is a humanist illusion... Does, however, this mean that alienation (in the symbolic order) is simply an unsurpassable condition of human subjectivity, a kind of transcendental apriori of being-human? Furthermore, when Marx writes about alienation, it is clear that he perceives the goal of the revolutionary emancipation as the overcoming of alienation; even in his “mature” work where the notion is rarely used, the vision of Communism is clearly that of a society organized in a transparent way and regulated by free collective subjectivity. “The flip side of commodity fetishism is the appearance that there is a more fundamental and unalienated position in the background, a position from which it would be possible to cognize the mistake that determines commodity fetishism”(92) – true, but is precisely this “appearance” not the basic premise not only of the early Marx but also

of the “mature” Marx of the critique of political economy? So it is Marx himself who doesn’t follow consequently the basic axiom of his critique of political economy, the notion of alienation as a structural a priori which implies a gap between knowledge and truth, between a subject fully (self-)conscious of his social position, and the properly politicized subject, a subject caught in an antagonistic process which precludes any self-transparency... If, however, we accept that the alienation of the labor force is unabolishable, what are the precise political implications of this thesis? For Marx, alienation of the labor force is directly identified with its self-commodification – should we then distinguish some more “basic” ontological alienation, a kind of transcendental a priori of human history, from the specific case of self-commodification? To resolve this deadlock, Tomšič introduces

“the distinction between constitutive alienation – alienation that is equivalent to structure – and constituted alienation – for instance, commodity fetishism, which follows from the misperception of the relation between the appearance of value and the structure that causes this appearance.”¹

Conceived in this way, Communism does not stand for the end of alienation but merely for the end of the commodity form as the form of social relations, i.e., not for the end of “constitutive” alienation but merely for the end of a historically specific form of “constituted” alienation – however, the question to be raised here is: but is the greatest illusion not the illusion that we can get the “pure” constitutive alienation without its fetishist mystification? How, then, can we bring together Marx and Lacan? Tomšič formulates the alternative between humanist-subjectivist Marxism and his version of reading Marx through Lacan in the following terms:

“Does a radical political program of liberation necessitate the dissolution of the link between subjectivity and negativity? Should one not, rather, determine the subject of politics by following Marx’s example when he recognized in the proletariat the symptomatic and negative point, from which the capitalist mode of production can be undermined?”²

But a Lukacsean Hegelo-Marxist approach has no difficulty in fully asserting the link between subjectivity and negativity – within

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1 Tomšič 2015, p.92

2 Ibid., p.234.

this approach, proletariat is precisely “negative point, from which the capitalist mode of production can be undermined.” In combining the assertion of proletarian subjectivity (as that of radical negativity) with the project of liberation as overcoming of alienation, the young Lukacs remains within the basic coordinates of Marx’s thought – for Marx, the “critique of political economy” (with its notions of alienation, labor force as the self-commodified subjectivity, etc.) is only meaningful on the background of the vision of a non-alienated self-transparent society. In other words, Marx’s theory simply does not provide the theoretical apparatus to think some more primordial and constitutive alienation that precedes the alienation imposed by capitalism. In order to conceive correctly this Marxian notion of proletariat, of the proletarian subjective position, one has to distinguish this subjective position from the “orthodox” Stalinist notion of Communist Party as the bearer of the objective knowledge” about the historical process. Lacan himself is guilty of confusing the two:

“The proletariat means what? It means that labour is radicalized on the level of pure and simple commodity, which also reduces the labourer to the same price. As soon as the labourer learns to know himself as such through theory, we can say that this step shows him the way to the status of – call it what you want – a scientist [savant]. He is no longer a proletarian *an sich*, if I may say so, he is no longer pure and simple truth, but he is *für sich*, what we call class-consciousness. He can even become the Party’s class-consciousness where one no longer speaks the truth.”³

Lacan clearly conflates here two distinct positions, two distinct notions of class consciousness. First, the Stalinist notion of consciousness as “objective knowledge,” a cognition of objective social reality with no immanent practical dimension – praxis enters afterwards, i.e., after I get to know how things objectively stand, I decide to act accordingly. This is how Stalinist Marxism distinguishes between scientific theory and proletarian ideology: first, objective theory provides a true insight into reality; then, on the basis of this insight, revolutionary party develops a revolutionary ideology in order to mobilize the working class and their allies. It is in this sense that, in his “On Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” Stalin wrote how

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3 Lacan 2006, p.173

“we must not base our orientation on the strata of society which are no longer developing, even though they at present constitute the predominant force, but on those strata which are developing and have a future before them, even though they at present do not constitute the predominant force. / In the eighties of the past century, in the period of the struggle between the Marxists and the Narodniks, the proletariat in Russia constituted an insignificant minority of the population, whereas the individual peasants constituted the vast majority of the population. But the proletariat was developing as a class, whereas the peasantry as a class was disintegrating. And just because the proletariat was developing as a class the Marxists based their orientation on the proletariat. And they were not mistaken; for, as we know, the proletariat subsequently grew from an insignificant force into a first-rate historical and political force. / Hence, in order not to err in policy, one must look forward, not backward.”⁴

In short, first I establish through a cold objective analysis which is the winning horse, and then only I put my bets on... a stance totally opposed to that of Lukacs who, in his *History and Class-Consciousness*, uses “(self)consciousness” not as a term for passive reception/ representation or awareness, but as the unity of intellect and will: “(self)consciousness” is inherently practical, it changes its subject-object – once the working class arrives at its adequate class consciousness, it changes into an actual revolutionary subject in its very social reality. The idea that knowing changes reality is what quantum physics shares with psychoanalysis (for which interpretation has effects in the real) as well as with historical materialism for whom the act of acquiring self-consciousness of the proletariat (of becoming aware of its historical mission) changes its object - through this awareness, proletariat in its very social reality turns into a revolutionary subject. Adorno mentioned somewhere that every great philosophy is a variation on the ontological proof of God’s existence: an attempt to pass directly from thought to being, first formulated by Parmenides in his assertion of the sameness of thinking and being. Even Marx belongs to this line: is his idea of “class consciousness” not precisely that of a thought which directly intervenes into social being. The ontological paradox of this Lukacsean position is that it combines universal truth with radical “partiality,” with taking side (for the oppressed in the class struggle): a universal truth can only be accessed from an engaged “partial” position; every stance of neutrality

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4 Stalin 1938

(“to see the truth, one should elevate oneself above the melee of particular struggles”) is false, it masks its own hidden partiality.

Lacan thus blurs the distinction between the dialectical-materialist notion of Consciousness as the cognitive reflection of objective reality, as a medium passively mirroring it, and Georg Lukacs’s notion (deployed in his *History and Class Consciousness*) of the act of Self-Consciousness as the constitution of a historical agent, an act of cognition which changes the object of cognition - this “performative” dimension is what is missing in dialectical materialist notion of cognition. What disappears thereby is the surprising proximity of Lukacs and Lacan who is interested precisely in how the gestures of symbolization are entwined with and embedded in the process of collective practice. What Lacan elaborates as the “twofold moment” of the symbolic function reaches far beyond the standard theory of the performative dimension of speech as it was developed in the tradition from J.L. Austin to John Searle:

“The symbolic function presents itself as a twofold movement in the subject: man makes his own action into an object, but only to return its foundational place to it in due time. In this equivocation, operating at every instant, lies the whole progress of a function in which action and knowledge alternate.”⁵

The historical example evoked by Lacan to clarify this “twofold movement” is indicative in its hidden references:

“in phase one, a man who works at the level of production in our society considers himself to belong to the ranks of the proletariat; in phase two, in the name of belonging to it, he joins in a general strike.”⁶

One can venture that Lacan’s (implicit) reference here is Lukacs’ *History and Class Consciousness* whose widely acclaimed French translation was published in mid-1950s. For Lukacs, consciousness is opposed to the mere knowledge of an object: knowledge is external to the known object, while consciousness is in itself ‘practical’, an act which changes its very object. (Once a worker “considers himself to belong to the ranks of the proletariat,” this changes his very reality: he acts differently.) One does something, one counts oneself as (declares

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5 Lacan 2007, p.72-73

6 Ibid.

oneself) the one who did it, and, on the base of this declaration, one does something new – the proper moment of subjective transformation occurs at the moment of declaration, not at the moment of act. Marx's name for such engaged universality is "proletariat," which is why the following observation misses the point:

"One can sometimes hear astonishment over the fact that Marx does not use the term 'proletariat' or 'proletarian' in *Capital*. He does not need to because 'labor power', 'surplus population' and 'industrial reserve army' designate the very same subjective position."(89)

"Surplus population" and "industrial reserve army" precisely do not designate a subjective position – they are empirical social categories. In a subtle implicit way (not unlike Freud's implicit distinction, unearthed by Lacan, between Ego-Ideal and superego), Marx does distinguish between proletariat (a subjective position) and working class (an objective social category).

Marx and Lacan

This brings us with all force to the question:

"what does the combination 'Marx and Lacan' stand for? Lacan next to Marx questions the optimistic and humanist readings, according to which Marx's critique aims to break out of symbolic determinations, negativity and alienation. Marx next to Lacan questions the pessimistic and apolitical readings, according to which Lacan's reformulation of the structuralist project supposedly amounts to the recognition of the 'universal madness' and autism of *jouissance* which dissolve the social links, and to the affirmation of the discursive a priori which determines human actions and presumably reveals the illusory features of every attempt in radical politics."(237)

What does this "third way" (neither naïve Marxist idea of sexual and economic liberation which allows us to break out of alienation nor psychoanalytic dismissal of every revolutionary project as imaginary illusion) effectively amount to? It is all too easy to resolve the problem by way of introducing a distinction between general alienation constitutive of humankind and commodity alienation as one of its species (or historical forms): capitalism gives birth to a de-substantialized subject

and, in this way, functions as a unique symptomatic point of entire history. We should mobilize here the dialectic of universal and particular: in the same way Marx simultaneously claimed that all hitherto history is the history of class struggles, *and* that bourgeoisie is the only true class in the history of humanity, we should say that all history is the history of alienation *and* that the only true alienation is the capitalist one.

It seems that Hegel himself misses this dialectical coincidence of opposites when, in his political thought, he criticizes universal democracy as abstract-formal: individuals partake directly in the universal, by way of casting their vote as abstract individuals, independently of their concrete position in the social edifice. Against this immediacy which prevents any actual representation, Hegel advocates corporate representation mediated by my particular belonging to an estate: I participate in the universal through my engagement in some specific field which constitutes my concrete identity (an artisan, a farmer, a professor...). What Hegel ignores here is the fact that in our societies, as a rule, the particular place that I occupy in the social edifice is deeply antagonistic, it is experienced as thwarting the full deployment of my potentials. What he ignores is a class antagonism that cuts across the entire social edifice – it is being caught in this antagonism that makes a subject universal, it is antagonism that cannot be reduced to particularity. More precisely, when and how do I experience myself as universal (subject), i.e., when does my universality become "for myself," a feature of how I relate to myself, not just "in itself," not just my objective property? When I am brutally dislocated from my particular identity. Say, how does my desire become universal? Through its hystericization, when no particular object can satisfy it, when, apropos every particular object, I experience how "*ce n'est pas ça!* (That's not it!)" This is why, for Marx, proletariat is the universal class: because it is a class which is a non-class, which cannot identify itself as a class. We thus have to turn around the standard Platonic notion of particularity as a failed universality, as a fall from the purity of the universal Idea: the Universal only emerges at the site of a failed particularity. Jean-Claude Milner wrote:

"Value represents what of labour-power is contained in each object that carries value, but it can only represent it in commodity exchange, that is, for another value. But labour-power is simply the subject. It is Marx's name for the subject."⁷

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7 Milner 2011, p.90

It is true that, for Marx, labor force is subject in the precise Hegelian sense of *substanzlose Subjektivitaet*, the zero-point of pure potentiality deprived of any substantial content.⁸ Fanon wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

“There is a zone of non-being, an extraordinary sterile and arid region, an utterly bare downward slope from which an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell.”⁹

Not all black men lack this advantage: Malcolm X was certainly aware that, in order to reach freedom, one has to descend into the European Hell... While in prison, the young Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam, and, after his parole in 1952, he engaged in its struggle, advocating black supremacy and the separation of white and black Americans – for him, “integration” was a fake attempt of the black to become like the White. However, in 1964, he rejected the Nation of Islam and, while continuing to emphasize black self-determination and self-defense, he distanced himself from every form of racism, advocating emancipatory universality; as a consequence of this “betrayal,” he was killed by three Nation of Islam members in February 1965. When Malcolm adopted X as his family name, thereby signalling that the slave traders who brought the enslaved Africans from their homeland brutally deprived them of their family and ethnic roots, of their entire cultural life-world, the point of this gesture was not to mobilize the blacks to fight for the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely to seize the opening provided by X, an unknown new (lack of) identity engendered by the very process of slavery which made the African roots forever lost. The idea is that this X which deprives the blacks of their particular tradition offers a unique chance to redefine (reinvent) themselves, to freely form a new identity much more universal than white people’s professed universality. Although Malcolm X found this new identity in the universalism of Islam, he was killed by Muslim fundamentalists. Therein resides the hard choice to be made: yes, Blacks are marginalized, exploited, humiliated, mocked, also feared, at the level of everyday practices, yes, they experience daily the hypocrisy of liberal freedoms and human rights, but in the

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⁸What raises a question is Milner’s implicit reference to Lacan’s formula of the signifier (which represents the subject for another signifier): is the appropriate homology not that of exchange-value and use-value where, as Marx put it, the exchange-value of a commodity can only be represented in the use-value of another commodity?

⁹ Fanon 1967, p.8

same movement they experience the promise of true freedom with regard to which the existing freedom is false – it is THIS freedom that fundamentalists escape.

What this means is that, in the struggle for Black emancipation, one should leave behind the lament for the loss of authentic African roots – let’s live this lament to TV series like the one based on Alex Haley’s *Roots*. Consequently, instead of desperately searching for our authentic roots, the task is to lose our roots in an authentic way – this loss is the birth of emancipatory subjectivity. To put it in speculative Hegelian terms (and one of the great points of Glick’s book is a continuing reference to Hegel), the true loss is the loss of the loss itself: when a black African is enslaved and torn out of his roots, he in a way not only loses these roots - retroactively he has to realize that he never really fully had these roots. What he, after this loss, experiences as his roots is a retroactive fantasy, a projection filling in the void.

The Politics of Separation

Is, however, this contraction of subjectivity to a substanceless evanescent point, the ultimate fact? In other words, is alienation the unsurpassable horizon of our existence? Although Tomši seems to endorse this notion, he points the way beyond it when he claims that

“constitutive alienation does not address solely the alienation of the subject but above all the alienation of the Other: it makes the Other appear in its split, incompleteness, contradiction and therefore inexistence. The correlate of this inexistence is the existence of the subject, the actual agency of the revolutionary process, which, however, does not assume the position of knowledge but the place of truth, as Lacan persistently repeated. Because the subject is produced, brought into existence in and through the gap in the Other, in other words, because there is a social entity, the proletariat, which articulates a universal demand for change in the name of all (being the social embodiment of a universal subjective position), this very enunciation grounds politics on the link between inexistence, alienation and universality.”¹⁰

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¹⁰Tomši 2015, pp.92-93. However, in Lacan’s formula of the discourse of the analyst, knowledge and truth are no longer opposed, they coincide as element and place: in this discourse, knowledge is not replaced by truth, it occupies the place of truth. It is in the Master’s discourse that subject occupies the place of truth.

One should be careful when one talks about “constitutive alienation.” There are two (main) ways to think the topic of alienation. From the humanist perspective, alienation is conceived as a temporal inversion, a state of things which should be set straight when humanity will succeed in re-appropriating the alienated substance of its existence. From the tragic perspective, alienation is irreducible since it is constitutive of being-human, grounded in the finitude of human existence. Lacan’s theory is unique in how it proposes a third position: alienation is not our ultimate destiny, it can be overcome, but not in the triumphalist humanist sense. For Lacan, alienation is by definition *subject’s* alienation, and Lacan has a specific concept for the “alienation of the Other” – *separation*. The core of Lacan’s atheism is best discerned in the conceptual couple of “alienation” and “separation” which he develops in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*.¹¹ In a first approach, the big Other stands for the subject’s alienation in the symbolic order: the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn’t speak, he is “spoken” by the symbolic structure. In short, this “big Other” is the name for the social substance, for all that on account of which the subject never fully dominates the effects of his acts, i.e. on account of which the final outcome of his activity is always something other than what he aimed at or anticipated. Separation takes place when the subject takes note of how the big Other is in itself inconsistent, lacking (“barred,” as Lacan liked to put it): the big Other doesn’t possess what the subject is lacking. In separation, the subject experiences how his own lack with regard to the big Other is already the lack that affects the big Other itself. To recall Hegel’s immortal dictum apropos of the Sphinx: “The enigmas of the Ancient Egyptians were enigmas also for the Egyptians themselves.” Along the same lines, the elusive, impenetrable *Dieu obscur* has to be impenetrable also to Himself; He has to have a dark side, something that is in Him more than Himself.¹²

The same goes for Christianity: we are not FIRST separated from God and THEN miraculously united with him; the point of Christianity is that the very separation unites us – it is in this separation that we are “like God,” like Christ on the cross, i.e., the separation of us from God is transposed into God himself. So when Meister Eckhart speaks about how, in order to open oneself to the grace of God, to allow Christ to be born in one’s soul, one has to “empty” oneself of everything “creaturely,” how is this *kenosis* related to the properly divine *kenosis* (or, for that

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11 See Chapter Xi in Lacan 1977

12 The same goes for woman in psychoanalysis: the masquerade of femininity means that there is no inaccessible feminine X beneath the multiple layers of masks, since these masks ultimately conceal the fact that there is nothing to conceal.

matter, even to the *kenosis* of alienation, of the subject being deprived of its substantial content)? Chesterton is fully aware that it is not enough for God to separate man from Himself so that mankind will love Him – this separation *has* to be reflected back into God Himself, so that God is abandoned *by himself*:

“When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.”¹³

Because of this overlapping between man’s isolation from God and God’s isolation from himself, Christianity is “terribly revolutionary.” We are one with God only when God is no longer one with himself, but abandons himself, “internalizes” the radical distance which separates us from Him. Our radical experience of separation from God is the very feature which unites us with Him – not in the usual mystical sense that only through such an experience, we open ourselves to the radical Otherness of the God, but in the sense similar to the one in which Kant claims that humiliation and pain are the only transcendental feelings: it is preposterous to think that I can identify myself with the divine bliss - only when I experience the infinite pain of separation from God, do I share an experience with God himself (Christ on the Cross). This moment of “Father, why have you abandoned me?”, of the separation of God from Himself causes great difficulty for commentators – here is a standard comment by Mark D. Roberts:

“This side of heaven, we will never fully know what Jesus was experiencing in this moment. Was he asking this question because, in the mystery of his incarnational suffering, he didn’t know why God had abandoned him? Or was his cry not so much a question as an expression of profound agony? Or was it both? What we do know is that Jesus entered into the Hell of separation

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13 Chesterton 1995, p.145

from God. The Father abandoned him because Jesus took upon himself the penalty for our sins. In that excruciating moment, he experienced something far more horrible than physical pain. The beloved Son of God knew what it was like to be rejected by the Father. As we read in 2 *Corinthians* 5:21, 'God made him who had no sin *to be* sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' I can write these words. I can say, truly, that the Father abandoned the Son for our sake, for the salvation of the world. But can I really grasp the mystery and the majesty of this truth? Hardly. As Martin Luther once said, 'God forsaking God. Who can understand it?'"¹⁴

Separation is thus not simply a redouble alienation but a specific case of the "negation of negation." When the subject's alienation (in the Other) is redoubled by the (self-)alienation of the Other itself, this redoubling radically changes the status of the alienated subject: the alienation of the Other itself (the lack/antagonism that undermines from within the consistency of the Other) opens up a unique space of freedom, of active intervention of the subject into the Other. Fully assuming the Other's lack and inconsistency means that the Other is no longer a complete mechanism that controls me: I can exploit its inconsistencies, play the Other against itself. So instead of getting caught in desperate attempts to distinguish between constitutive and constituted alienation, one should focus on *how to determine separation in political terms*. According to Tomši, in traditional Marxism, the standard social-democratic scenario proposes

"including the workers in a more just distribution of profit, collective ownership of the means of production, regulating financial speculation and bringing the economy down to the solid ground of the real sector. More radical political experiments were equally unsuccessful in abolishing alienation: 'It's not because one nationalizes the means of production at the level of socialism in one country that one has thereby done away with surplus-value, if one doesn't know what it is'. Nationalization does not produce the necessary global structural change, which would abolish the market of labour and thereby the structural contradiction that transforms the subject into a commodity-producing commodity. The non-relation between labour-power and surplus-value remains operative, and nationalization in the last instance evolves into a form of state capitalism. Marx, however, did not claim that

¹⁴ Quoted from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/the-seven-last-words-of-christ-reflections-for-holy-week/>.

the appropriation of surplus-value would abolish the capitalist forms of alienation and fetishization. This would suggest that the abolition of capitalists, these social fanatics of the valorization of value and personifications of capital, would already solve the problem. Marx's point is rather that capitalism can exist without capitalists because the capitalist drive to self-valorization is structural, systemic and autonomous – but there cannot be any capitalism without the proletariat." (65-66)

OK, nationalization doesn't work - but what, then, *does* work? In what does then consist "the necessary global structural change, which would abolish the market of labour and thereby the structural contradiction that transforms the subject into a commodity-producing commodity"? Again, if signifying alienation is unsurpassable, constitutive of subjectivity, and if the homology is full between surplus-enjoyment and surplus-value, is then the economic alienation also unsurpassable? If yes, in what precise sense? What, then, can the overcoming of capitalism achieve, what is its goal or horizon? What is the third way between resigning oneself to capitalist alienation and the humanist fantasy of reconciled transparent society? Our wager is that, even if we take away the teleological notion of Communism (the society of the fully unleashed productivity) as the implicit standard by which Marx as it were measures the alienation of the existing society, the bulk of his "critique of political economy," the insight into the self-propelling vicious cycle of the capitalist (re)production, survives.

The task of today's thought is thus double: on the one hand, to repeat the Marxist "critique of political economy" without the utopian-ideological notion of Communism as its inherent standard; on the other hand, to imagine effectively breaking out of the capitalist horizon without falling into the trap of returning to the eminently premodern notion of a balanced, (self)restrained society (the "pre-Cartesian" temptation to which most of today's ecology succumbs). A return to Hegel is crucial in order to perform this task, a return which gets rid of all the classic anti-Hegelian topics, especially that of Hegel's voracious narcissism, of a Hegelian Idea which endeavours to swallow/internalize entire reality. Instead of trying to undermine or overcome this "narcissism" from the outside, emphasizing the "preponderance of the objective" (or the fact that "the Whole is the non-true" and all other similar motifs of Adorno's rejection of "identitarian" idealism), one should rather problematize the figure of Hegel criticized here by way of asking a simple question: but *which* Hegel is here our point of reference? Do both Lukacs and Adorno

not refer to the “idealist-subjectivist” (mis)reading of Hegel, to the standard image of Hegel as the “absolute idealist” who asserted Spirit as the true agent of history, its Subject-Substance? Within this framework, Capital can effectively appear as a new embodiment of the Hegelian Spirit, an abstract monster which moves and mediates itself, parasitizing upon the activity of actual really-existing individuals. This is why Lukacs also remains all too idealist when he proposes to simply replace the Hegelian Spirit with the proletariat as the Subject-Object of History: Lukacs is here not really Hegelian, but a pre-Hegelian idealist.¹⁵

If, however, one problematizes this shared presupposition of Lukacs and Adorno, another Hegel appears, a more “materialist” Hegel for whom reconciliation between subject and substance does not mean that the subject “swallows” its substance, internalizing it into its own subordinate moment. Reconciliation rather amounts to a much more modest overlapping or redoubling of the two separations: the subject has to recognize in its alienation from the Substance the separation of the Substance from itself. This overlapping is what is missed in the Feuerbach-Marxian logic of des-alienation in which the subject overcomes its alienation by recognizing itself as the active agent which itself posited what appears to it as its substantial presupposition. In the Hegelian “reconciliation” between Subject and Substance, there is no absolute Subject which, in total self-transparency, appropriates/ internalizes all objective substantial content. But “reconciliation” also doesn’t mean (as it does in the line of German Idealism from Hoelderlin to Schelling) that the subject should renounce its *hubris* of perceiving itself as the axis of the world and accept its constitutive “de-centering,” its dependency on some primordial abyssal Absolute which is beyond/ beneath the subject/object divide, and, as such, also beyond subjective conceptual grasp. Subject is not its own origin: Hegel firmly rejects Fichte’s notion of the absolute I which posits itself and is nothing but the

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15 Although some motifs seem to connect the Frankfurt School appropriation of psychoanalysis and Lacan’s “return to Freud,” actual contacts between the two are more or less inexistent. As for the “Kant avec Sade” motif, there are no clear indications that Lacan was directly influenced by Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: his approach is totally different, so we have nothing more than a contingent overlapping. There is only one proven direct contact: Juan Pablo Luchelli (in his “Lacan, Horkheimer et le déclin du père” – see <http://www.journaldumauss.net/?LACAN-HORKHEIMER-ET-LE-DECLIN-DU-PERE>) discovered that Lacan, in his early *écrit* “Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l’individu” (1938), referred to Max Horkheimer’s essay on “Authority and Family” (from 1936) to sustain his thesis on the decline of (what Lacan at that time called) “the paternal imago.” (The reason this reference to the Frankfurt School went unnoticed was that the literature to Lacan’s text (which he submitted) was printed at the end of the collective volume in which Lacan’s text appeared.) Although one shouldn’t make too much of this (the notion of the decline of paternal authority was widespread among conservative critics of culture at that time), it does provide a further link to the Hegelian and Marxist background of the early Lacan

pure activity of this self-positing. But subject is also not just a secondary accidental appendix/outgrowth of some pre-subjective substantial reality: there is no substantial Being to which subject can return, no encompassing organic Order of Being in which subject has to find its proper place. “Reconciliation” between subject and substance means the acceptance of this radical lack of any firm foundational point: subject is not its own origin, it comes second, it is dependent upon its substantial presuppositions; but these presuppositions also do not have a substantial consistency of their own but are always retroactively posited.

What this also means is that Communism should no longer be conceived as the subjective (re)appropriation of the alienated substantial content – all versions of reconciliation as “subject swallows the substance” should be rejected. So, again, “reconciliation” is the full acceptance of the abyss of the de-substantialized process as the only actuality there is: subject has no substantial actuality, it comes second, it only emerges through the process of separation, of overcoming of its presuppositions, and these presuppositions are also just a retroactive effect of the same process of their overcoming. The result is thus that there is, at both extremes of the process, a failure-negativity inscribed into the very heart of the entity we are dealing with. If the status of the subject is thoroughly “processual,” it means that it emerges through the very failure to fully actualize itself. This brings us again to one of the possible formal definitions of subject: a subject tries to articulate (“express”) itself in a signifying chain, this articulation fails, and by means and through this failure, the subject emerges: the subject is the failure of its signifying representation – this is why Lacan writes the subject of the signifier as \$, as “barred.” In a love letter, the very failure of the writer to formulate his declaration in a clear and efficient way, his oscillations, the letter’s fragmentation, etc., can in themselves be the proof (perhaps the necessary and the only reliable proof) that the professed love is authentic – here, the very failure to deliver the message properly is the sign of its authenticity. If the message is delivered in a smooth way, it arouses suspicions that it is part of a well-planned approach, or that the writer loves himself, the beauty of his writing, more than his love-object, i.e., that the object is effectively reduced to a pretext for engaging in the narcissistically-satisfying activity of writing.

And the same goes for substance: substance is not only always-already lost, it only comes to be through its loss, as a secondary return-to-itself - which means that substance is always-already subjectivized. In “reconciliation” between subject and substance, both poles thus lose

their firm identity. Let us take the case of ecology: radical emancipatory politics should aim neither at the complete mastery over nature nor at the humanity's humble acceptance of the predominance of Mother-Earth. Rather, nature should be exposed in all its catastrophic contingency and indeterminacy, and human agency should assume the whole unpredictability of the consequences of its activity - viewed from this perspective of the "other Hegel," the revolutionary act no longer involves as its agent the Lukacsean substance-subject, the agent who knows what it does while doing it.

From Kant to Hegel, Politically

The inner logic of the passage from Kant to Hegel, the key reversal that defines the very core of German Idealism, is much more convoluted than it may appear. One totally misses this logic when one simply reproduces Hegel's critique of Kant – if one does just this, it is easy for Kantians to demonstrate that Hegel is criticizing a straw-man, that he effectively reduced Kantian thought to its primitive caricature. What one should do is to begin with the simplified version of Hegel's critique of Kant, and then listen to the Kantian reply to it – and when we do it consequently, things start to get interesting: we soon discover that, in their defense of Kant, the Kantians have to bring in the gap between what Kant literally says (more precisely: what he seems to be saying in a first, immediate, reading) and what he is effectively saying without being fully aware of it (a dimension rendered visible only through their detailed interpretation of Kant)... in short, they defend Kant by showing how Kant is really more refined, not what Hegel's critique targets, even if Kant simplifies himself and sometimes writes as if he doesn't know it. And then comes the crucial Hegelian counter-move: to show that this self-corrected Kant asserted against Hegel's critique IS Hegel. "Hegel" is not a simple overcoming of Kant, Hegel is the Kant which emerges as a reaction to the standard Hegelian critique of Kant, the Kant (self-) corrected through this reaction, the Kant whose unsaid is brought out to awareness through it. Let's take just one simplified example. According to the standard Hegelian critique, the limitation of the Kantian universalistic ethic of the "categorical imperative" (the unconditional injunction to do one's duty) resides in its formal indeterminacy: the moral Law does not tell me *what* my duty is, it merely tells me *that* I should accomplish my duty, and so leaves room for an empty voluntarism (whatever I decide will be my duty *is* my duty). It is easy for a true Kantian to reply that, far from being a limitation, this very feature brings us to the core of ethical autonomy: it is not possible to derive the concrete obligations pertaining to one's specific situation from the moral Law itself — which means

that the subject himself must assume the responsibility of translating the abstract injunction into a series of concrete obligations. The full acceptance of this paradox compels us to reject any reference to duty as an excuse: "I know this is heavy and can be painful, but what can I do, this is my duty..." Kant's ethics is often taken as justifying such an attitude — no wonder Adolf Eichmann himself referred to Kant when trying to justify his role in planning and executing the Holocaust: he was just doing his duty and obeying the Führer's orders. However, the aim of Kant's emphasis on the subject's full moral autonomy and responsibility was precisely to prevent any such manoeuver of putting the blame on some figure of the big Other... But are we here still fully in Kant? Are Kant's statements often not ambiguous with regard to the full meaning of moral autonomy? My point is, of course, that by defending Kant in this way, we *are already in Hegel*.

While the Kantian approach relies on the unsurmountable gap that forever separates the universal transcendental form from its contingent empirical content, Hegel overcomes this gap with his notion of "concrete universality" which mediates form and content. The Kantian subject can be said to be "castrated" in the sense that it is constitutively separated from the real Thing (the supreme Good which remains forever out of reach), and the universal form (of the ethical injunction) is a stand-in for the absent content (the real Thing). Here enters a specifically Laclauian dialectic of universal and particular: since universality is empty, since all content is by definition particular, the only way for a universality to get filled in with content is to elevate/transubstantiate some particular content into its place-holder, and the struggle for which this element will be is the struggle for hegemony.

An exemplary case of Laclau's theory of hegemony is his detailed analysis of populism.¹⁶ Populism is for Laclau inherently neutral: a kind of transcendental-formal political dispositif that can be incorporated into different political engagements. Populism is not a specific political movement but the political at its purest: the "inflection" of the social space that can affect any political content. Its elements are purely formal, "transcendental," not ontic: populism occurs when a series of particular "democratic" demands (for better social security, health services, lower taxes, against war, etc.) is enchained in a series of equivalences, and this enchainment produces "people" as the universal political subject. What characterizes populism is not the ontic content of these demands, but the mere formal fact that, through their enchainment, "people" emerges as a political subject, and all different particular struggles and antagonisms

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¹⁶ See Laclau 2005.

appears as parts of a global antagonistic struggle between “us” (people) and “them.” Again, the content of “us” and “them” is not prescribed in advance but, precisely, the stake of the struggle for hegemony: even ideological elements like brutal racism and anti-Semitism can be enchain in a populist series of equivalences, in the way “them” is constructed.

It is clear now why Laclau prefers populism to class struggle: populism provides a neutral “transcendental” matrix of an open struggle whose content and stakes are themselves defined by the contingent struggle for hegemony, while “class struggle” presupposes a particular social group (the working class) as a privileged political agent; this privilege is not itself the outcome of hegemonic struggle, but grounded in the “objective social position” of this group – the ideologico-political struggle is thus ultimately reduced to an epiphenomenon of “objective” social processes and their conflicts. For Laclau, on the contrary, the fact that some particular struggle is elevated into the “universal equivalent” of all struggles is not a pre-determined fact, but itself the result of the contingent political struggle for hegemony – in some constellation, this struggle can be the workers’ struggle, in another constellation, the patriotic anti-colonialist struggle, in yet another constellation the anti-racist struggle for cultural tolerance... *there is nothing in the inherent positive qualities of some particular struggle that predestines it for such a hegemonic role* of the “general equivalent” of all struggles. The struggle for hegemony thus not only presupposes an irreducible gap between the universal form and the multiplicity of particular contents, but also the contingent process by means of which one among these contents is “transubstantiated” into the immediate embodiment of the universal dimension – say (Laclau’s own example), in Poland of the 1980, the particular demands of *Solidarnosc* were elevated into the embodiment of the people’s global rejection of the Communist regime, so that all different versions of the anti-Communist opposition (from the conservative-nationalist opposition through the liberal-democratic opposition and cultural dissidence to Leftist workers’ opposition) recognized themselves in the empty signifier “Solidarnosc”... Does Laclau not come uncannily close what Hegel calls concrete universality? In the struggle for hegemony, universality is never neutral, it is always colored by some particular element that hegemonizes it? Laclau’s difference from Hegel resides merely in the fact that, for Laclau, the mediation between universality and particularity ultimately always fails since the gap between empty universal form and the element filling it in persists, and the struggle for hegemony goes on forever. Laclau’s basic argument is rendered succinctly by Oliver Marchart:

“on a formal level, every politics is based on the articulatory logics of ‘a combination and condensation of inconsistent attitudes’, not only the politics of fascism. As a result, the fundamental social antagonism will always be displaced to some degree since, as we have noted earlier, the ontological level – in this case, antagonism – can never be approached directly and without political mediation. It follows that distortion is constitutive for every politics: politics as such, not only fascist politics, proceeds through ‘distortion’.”¹⁷

This reproach remains caught in the “binary” tension between essence and appearance: the fundamental antagonism never appears as such, directly, in a directly transparent way (in Marxist terms: the “pure” revolutionary situation in which all social tensions would be simplified/reduced to the class struggle never takes place, it is always mediated by other – ethnic, religious, etc. – antagonisms) - the “essence” never appears directly, but always in a displaced/distorted way. So while it is true that “human relations exist in the way in which they are distorted. There are no human relations without distortion.”(172) However, this reference to distortion allows for different readings. It can be read in the standard way, as a reminder of the complexity of historical situations – recall how, in 1916, Lenin replied those who dismissed the Irish uprising as a mere “putsch” of no interest for the proletarian struggle:

“To imagine that social revolution is *conceivable* without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie *with all its prejudices*, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. - to imagine all this is to *repudiate social revolution*. So one army lines up in one place and says, ‘We are for socialism’, and another, somewhere else and says, ‘We are for imperialism’, and that will be a social revolution! Only those who hold such a ridiculously pedantic view could vilify the Irish rebellion by calling it a ‘putsch’.

Whoever expects a ‘pure’ social revolution will *never* live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 was a bourgeois-democratic

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17 Marchart 2007, p. 174.

revolution. It consisted of a series of battles in which *all* the discontented classes, groups and elements of the population participated. Among these there were masses imbued with the crudest *prejudices*, with the vaguest and most fantastic aims of struggle; there were small groups which accepted Japanese money, there were speculators and adventurers, etc. But *objectively*, the mass movement was breaking the back of tsarism and paving the way for democracy; for this reason the class-conscious workers led it.

The socialist revolution in Europe *cannot* be anything other than an outburst of mass struggle on the part of all and sundry oppressed and discontented elements. Inevitably, sections of the petty bourgeoisie and of the backward workers will participate in it — without such participation, *mass struggle is impossible*, without it no revolution is possible—and just as inevitably will they bring into the movement their prejudices, their reactionary fantasies, their weaknesses and errors. But *objectively* they will attack *capital*, and the class-conscious vanguard of the revolution, the advanced proletariat, expressing this objective truth of a variegated and discordant, motley and outwardly fragmented, mass struggle, will be able to unite and direct it, capture power, seize the banks, expropriate the trusts which all hate (though for difficult reasons!), and introduce other dictatorial measures which in their totality will amount to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the victory of socialism, which, however, will by no means immediately ‘purge’ itself of petty-bourgeois slag.”¹⁸

A biographic detail should be kept in mind when we read these lines: they were written immediately after the period at the beginning of WWI when, out of despair at the nationalist breakdown of almost all Social Democracies, Lenin withdrew into “pure” theory and engaged in a detailed reading of Hegel’s logic. One usually associates Hegel with linear teleology and progressive “historical necessity” – but the basic lesson that Lenin drew from Hegel was exactly the opposite one: the complex contingency of the historical process, over-determination of every “basic” tendency by an intricate network of specific historical conditions where “the exception is the rule.” Lenin goes up to saying that, in a concrete situation, the fate of the entire revolutionary process can hinge on seizing (or not) a particular historical opening. (Later, in 1917, he wrote that, if Bolsheviks do not seize the unique revolutionary chance,

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18 Lenin 1916.

it may last for decades before the next chance will arrive.) This is Lenin’s own “materialist reversal of Marx” (of Marx’s historicist evolutionism whose manifesto is the (in)famous “Preface” to the *Critique of Political Economy*) into Hegel. One should thus note that the reference to Hegel enabled Lenin to get rid of the very feature of orthodox Marxism that Althusser attributed to Hegel’s influence on Marx (linear historical determinism, etc.).

For Laclau, these Lenin’s ruminations remain all too “essentialist”: in spite of all flexibility, Lenin clearly privileges the “class-conscious vanguard of the revolution, the advanced proletariat,” able to express the “objective truth of a variegated and discordant, motley and outwardly fragmented, mass struggle.” So although a revolution can “no means immediately ‘purge’ itself of petty-bourgeois slag,” in its further development it will nonetheless be obliged to enforce “dictatorial measures” which will amount to the purge of petit-bourgeois slag... The problem is, of course, where to set the limit, i.e., whom can the “class-conscious vanguard” accept as partners in their struggle. Today, it is obvious that (some version, at least) of feminist, ecology, struggle for religious freedoms, etc., fits the bill – but what about, say, Boko Haram? For its members, the liberation of women appears as the most visible feature of the destructive cultural impact of capitalist modernization, so that Boko Haram (whose name can be roughly and descriptively translated as ‘Western education is forbidden’, specifically the education of women) can perceive and portray itself as an agent fighting the destructive impact of modernization, by way of imposing a hierarchic regulation of the relationship between the sexes. The enigma is thus: why do Muslims, who have undoubtedly been exposed to exploitation, domination, and other destructive and humiliating aspects of colonialism, target in their response what is (for us, at least) the best part of the Western legacy: our egalitarianism and personal freedoms, inclusive of a healthy dose of irony and a mocking of all authorities? The obvious answer is that their target is well-chosen: what for them makes the liberal West so unbearable is not only that it practice exploitation and violent domination but that, to add insult to injury, it presents this brutal reality in the guise of its opposite: freedom, equality and democracy.

So, again, how to enact Lenin’s insight here? Laclau’s solution is obvious: why even continue to talk about the “fundamental social antagonism”? All we have is a series of antagonisms which (can) build a chain of equivalences, metaphorically “contaminating” each other, and which antagonism emerges as “central” is the contingent result of the struggle for hegemony. Is, however, the rejection of the very notion of “fundamental antagonism” the only alternative to “class essentialism”?

My Hegelian answer is a resounding NO. Laclau's position is here Kantian: struggle for hegemony is his transcendental *a priori*, a form filled in with different contingent contents, or, to put it in another way, Laclau's Kantian position is the one of symbolic castration as the ultimate horizon of our experience. "Castration" refers here to the irreducible gap between the transcendental form and its contingent content, and, for Laclau, Hegel disavows castration by way of enacting the move from the Kantian split ("castrated") subject, a subject divided between its form and its contingent content, to the Hegelian allegedly self-reconciled subject in which all antagonisms are sublated (*aufgehoben*) through dialectical mediation. However, the move from Kant to Hegel in no way abolishes "negativity, in the guise of castration" and enacts a return to "essentialism"; on the contrary, it radicalizes negativity (or the Kantian gap) in a very precise way. In Kant, negativity is located into the gap that forever separates us, finite humans, from the Thing, so that we only have access to its place-holder, the empty form of the Law. What Hegel does is to transpose the gap between appearance and the inaccessible Thing into the Thing itself, thoroughly redefining it as the coincidence of opposites at its most radical – the Real as that what is always distorted in its symbolic representations and the Real as the very force (thrust) of this distortion.

What this means is that "castration" is not just the gap between the empty form and its content but a torsion in content itself which gives rise to form, more precisely: to the gap between content and form. We only attain the level of proper dialectical analysis of a form when we conceive a certain formal procedure not as expressing a certain aspect of the (narrative) content, but as marking/signalling the part of content that is excluded from the explicit narrative line, so that - therein resides the proper theoretical point - if we want to reconstruct "all" of the narrative content, we must reach beyond the explicit narrative content as such, and include some formal features which act as the stand-in for the "repressed" aspect of the content.¹⁹ To take the well-known elementary example from the analysis of melodramas: the emotional excess that cannot express itself directly in the narrative line, finds its outlet in the ridiculously sentimental musical accompaniment or in other formal features. Exemplary is here the way Claude Berri's *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources* displace Marcel Pagnol's original film (and his own later novelization of it) on which they are based. That is to say, Pagnol's original retains the traces of the "authentic" French provincial community life in which people's acts follow old, quasi-pagan religious patterns,

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¹⁹The thesis that form is part of content, the return of its repressed, should, of course, be supplemented by its reversal: content is ultimately also nothing but an effect and indication of the incompleteness of the form, of its "abstract" character.

while Berri's films fail in their effort to recapture the spirit of the closed premodern community. However, unexpectedly, the inherent obverse of Pagnol's universe is the theatricality of the action and the element of ironic distance and comicality, while Berri's films, while shot more "realistically," put emphasis on destiny (the musical leitmotif of the films is based on Verdi's *La forza del destino*), and on the melodramatic excess whose hystericality often borders on the ridiculous (like the scene in which, after the rain passes his field, the desperate Jean cries and shouts at Heaven). So, paradoxically, the closed ritualized premodern community implies theatrical comicality and irony, while the modern "realistic" rendering involves Fate and melodramatic excess... In this respect, Berri's two films are to be opposed to Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*: in both cases, we are dealing with the tension between form and content; however, in *Breaking the Waves*, the excess is located in the content (the subdued pseudo-documentary form makes palpable the excessive content), while in Berri, the excess in the form obfuscates and thus renders palpable the flaw in content, the impossibility today to realize the pure classical tragedy of Destiny.

Therein resides the key consequence of the move from Kant to Hegel: the very gap between content and form is to be reflected back into content itself, as an indication that this content is not all, that something was repressed/excluded from it. This exclusion which establishes the form itself is the "primordial repression /*Ur-Verdraengung*/," and no matter how much we bring out all the repressed content, this gap of primordial repression persists – again, why? The immediate answer is the identity of the repression with the return of the repressed, which means that the repressed content does not pre-exist repression, but is retroactively constituted by the very process of repression. Through different forms of negation/obfuscation (condensation, displacement, denegation, disavowal...), the repressed is allowed to penetrate the public conscious speech, to find an echo in it (the most direct example from Freud: when one of his patient said "I do not know who this woman in my dream is, but I am sure she is not my mother!«, mother entered the speech) – we get here a kind of "negation of negation," i.e., the content is negated/repressed, but this repression is in the same gesture itself negated in the guise of the return of the repressed (which is why we are definitely not dealing here with the proper Hegelian negation of negation). The logic seems here similar to that of the relationship between sin and Law in Paul, where there is no sin without Law, i.e., where the Law/prohibition itself creates the transgression it tries to subdue, so that, if we take away the Law, we also lose what the Law tried to "repress," or, in more Freudian terms, if we take away the "repression," we also lose the repressed content.

But still, what do all these obscure distinctions amount to politically? How do they open up the space for a political practice that reaches beyond the alternative of Leninist “class essentialism” and Laclauian “chain of equivalences” with no element destined in advance to play hegemonic role? One should make a detour here and bring into debate another paradoxical figure of universality which we can provisionally call “surnumerary universality,” the universality embodied in the element which sticks out of the existing Order, i.e., the element which, while internal to it, has no proper place within it, what Jacques Ranciere calls the “part of no-part” and what Hegel called *Poebel* (rabble). In its very status of the destructive excess of social totality, rabble is the “reflexive determination” of the totality as such, the immediate embodiment of its universality, the particular element in the guise of which the social totality encounter itself among its elements, and, as such, the key constituent of its identity. Although the two universalities seem to share a minimal common feature (a particular element stands for universality), what separates them is the aspect of negativity that pertains to the second one: in hegemonic universality, all elements emphatically identify with the particular feature that hegemonizes universality (“Solidarity is all of us!” in the case of Poland), while the surnumerary universality is experienced as the excremental element of non-identification, as a negation of all particular qualities. The struggle is ultimately not just about which particular content will hegemonize the empty form of universality but *the struggle between these two universalities*, the hegemonic one and the surnumerary one. More precisely, the two universalities are not thoroughly incompatible; they rather operate at different levels, so the task is to combine them – how? Hegemonic universality designates an empty place and surnumerary element is the element in the social space which lacks a proper place and is as such a stand-in for universality among the elements. The minimal definition of radical politics is thus that the “part of no-part,” the excremental element, occupies the hegemonic place, or, to quote the line from “International,” that those who are nothing (excrement) become all (hegemonize the entire field).

We are dealing with three main positions here. According to the first, orthodox Marxist, one, class opposition provides a hermeneutic key for decoding other struggles (feminist, ecological, national liberation) which are all forms of appearance of the “true” class struggle and can only be resolved through the victorious proletarian revolution. The second position, the conservative-populist one, turns this relationship around: Leftist multiculturalism, ecology, etc., are a matter of upper class elitism which despises the “narrowness” of the hard-working lower classes.

The third, Laclauian, position asserts open struggle for hegemony: there is no ontological guarantee that feminist struggle, ecological struggle, etc., will become part of the same “chain of equivalences” with economic class struggle, their enchainment is the stake of the open struggle for hegemony. There is, however, a fourth position: class antagonism is not the ultimate signified of other struggles but the “bone in the throat” of all other struggles, the cause of the failure of Meaning of other struggles. The relation of each of these struggles towards class antagonism is an index of its inherent limitation/inadequacy – say, the US mainstream liberal feminism at some point obfuscates the basic dimension of women’s exploitation; or, today’s humanitarian compassion for the refugees obfuscates the true causes of their predicament. Class struggle/antagonism is thus not the ultimate referent-signified, the hidden meaning, of all other struggles but a measure of the “(non)authenticity” of all other struggles – and the paradox is that the same holds for class struggle itself: in Hegelese, class struggle necessarily encounters itself in its oppositional determination (*gegensaetzliche Bestimmung*) – say, when, in the US, the Tea Party members “encode” their opposition to multiculturalism, feminism, their racism, etc., in class terms, as a working class opposition to the preoccupations of the rich educated classes, this direct class reference functions as a false screen dissimulating the true link between class antagonism and the issue at stake (feminism, racism...) - again, class difference can serve as its own best mask.²⁰

Bringing in the Chorus

This brings us to the key feature of what one could call the politics of separation: the ultimate separation to be fully assumed and endorsed is the separation of the very goal of the emancipatory process, the separation of this goal from itself. What we have in mind here is neither accepting different ways to reach this goal (the old mantra “each country will build socialism in its own way”) nor the historical relativization of the goal itself (“each country will build its own socialism”), but the full acceptance of the fact that, in the process of its actualization, the goal itself changes. Etienne Balibar opposes Hegel (teleological movement towards a final resolution) and Spinoza (antagonism, being on the way

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20The link between antagonism, *objet a* and failed interpellation resides in the fact that interpellation as such always displaces-“betrays”-obfuscates antagonism. The antagonistic character of “class struggle” means precisely that members of the two classes are never directly interpellated as pure class subjects (Capitalists and Proletarians), but always in a mystified-displaced way (as in the case of fashion: today’s rich are interpellated – like to experience themselves - as populists, wearing stoned jeans, etc.). In this precise way, *objet a* is the remainder which emerges as the index of the failed interpellation, of the fact that the interpellation of individuals into their symbolic identity always displaces the underlying antagonism.

towards..., without a final guarantee of the outcome, since the same logic that causes and multiplies the Good - that of *imitatio affecti* - causes and multiplies also the Evil). (It is easy to note how this opposition is homologous to the one between the Jewish notion of wandering on a divine mission without the ultimate teleological closure and the Christian eschatology.) But is the opposition of Hegel and Spinoza really the one described by Balibar? Hegel's position is subtly different: yes, at the end we reach the goal *because the goal is the state of things we reach*, i.e., whatever (contingently) happens, whichever turn things take, a teleological order is established retroactively which changes contingency into necessity. Recall how the Hegelian dialectical *process* begins with some affirmative idea towards which it strives, but in the course its actualization *this idea itself undergoes a profound transformation* (not just a tactical accommodation, but an essential redefinition), because the idea itself is caught into the process, (over)determined by its actualization.²¹ Say, we have a revolt motivated by a request for justice: once people get really engaged in it, they become aware that much more is needed to bring true justice than just the limited requests with which they started (to repeal some laws, etc.). A revolutionary process is not a well-planned strategic activity, with no place in it for a full immersion into the Now, without regard to long-term consequences. Quite the contrary: the suspension of all strategic considerations based upon hope for a better future, the stance of *on attaque, et puis, on le verra* (Lenin often referred to this slogan of Napoleon), is a key part of any revolutionary process.

Lukacs himself later changed his position with regard to this key point: the ignored obverse of his accommodation to Marxist orthodoxy (he no longer conceives the social practice of collective historical subjectivity as the ultimate horizon of thinking but endorses a general ontology with humanity as its part) is the acceptance of the tragic dimension of the revolutionary subject. This ignored aspect of Lukacs's thought was brought out in Jeremy Glick's *The Black Radical Tragic*²², a book we were all waiting for *without knowing it*. Glick goes much further than the standard notion of revolutionary tragic deployed by Marx and Engels who locate the tragedy of a revoluti(on in the figure of a hero

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 21 In his famous Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx wrote (in his worst evolutionary mode) that humanity only poses to itself tasks which it is able to solve: "Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation." (Quoted from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>.) One is tempted to turn this statement around and claim that humanity as a rule poses to itself tasks which it cannot solve, and thereby triggers an unpredictable process in the course of which the task (goal) itself gets redefined.

22 Glick 2016.

who comes too early, ahead of his time, and is therefore destined to fail although, in the long view, he stands for historical progress (their exemplary figure is Thomas Munzer). For Glick, tragedy is immanent to a revolutionary process, it is inscribed into its very core defined by a series of oppositions: leader(ship) versus masses, radicality versus compromise... For example, with regard to the first opposition, there is no easy way out, the gap between leader(ship) and masses, their miscommunication, emerges necessarily – Glick quotes a touching passage from Edouard Glissant's play *Monsieur Toussaint* (Act IV, Scene V) where Toussaint, laughing in delirium, sadly reflects how he "can barely write":

"I write the word 'Toussaint,' Macaia spells out 'traitor.' I write the word 'discipline' and Moyse without even a glance at the page shots 'tyranny.' I write 'prosperity'; Dessalines backs away, he thinks in his heart 'weakness.' No, I do not know how to write, Manuel."²³

(Note the irony of how this passage refers to the racist cliché about the Black who cannot write.) The background of this passage is the tension in the revolutionary process as reflected in personal relations: Toussaint's nephew Moïse advocated the uncompromising fidelity to Black masses and wanted to break up large estates, while Toussaint himself was possessed by a fear of masses and saw as his task to retain discipline and the smooth run of the production process, so he ordered Moïse to be executed for sedition. Dessalines later triumphed and, after the establishment of a Black state, proclaimed himself emperor of Haiti, introducing a new form of domination (as well as ordering the massacre of all remaining white inhabitants of Haiti) in the very triumph of the revolution. In order to grasp these tragic twists, it is crucial to count the crowd (which, in the theatrical dispositif, appears as Chorus) as one of the active agents, not just as the passive commentator of the events – the title of Chapter 2 of Glick's book is, quite appropriately, "Bringing in the Chorus" (and I realized with pleasure that I did the same in my version of *Antigone* where, at the end, Chorus intervenes, arresting and executing both Antione and Creon).

The principal antagonism which underlies this tension is the one between fidelity to the universal Cause and the necessity of compromise – and, at least from my standpoint, Glick's deployment of this antagonism is the theoretical and political climax of his book. Glick starting point is

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 23 Ibid., p. 117.

the reference to C.L.R. James who clearly saw that the early Christian revolutionaries “were not struggling to establish the medieval papacy. The medieval papacy was a mediation to which the ruling forces of society rallied in order to strangle the quest for universality of the Christian masses.«²⁴ Revolutions explodes with radical millenarian demands of actualizing a new universality, and mediations are symptoms of its failure, of thwarting people’s expectations. The quest for universality of the masses “forbids any mediation”²⁵ – was the tragic turn-around of the Syriza government not the last big case of such a “mediation”: the principled NO to European blackmail was immediately followed by a YES to the “mediation«... Glick mentions here Georg Lukacs, the great advocate of “mediation” who, in 1935, wrote “Hoelderlin’s Hyperion,” a weird, but crucial, short essay in which he praises Hegel’s endorsement of the Napoleonic Thermidor against Hoelderlin’s intransigent fidelity to the heroic revolutionary utopia:

“Hegel comes to terms with the post-Thermidorian epoch and the close of the revolutionary period of bourgeois development, and he builds up his philosophy precisely on an understanding of this new turning-point in world history. Hoelderlin makes no compromise with the post-Thermidorian reality; he remains faithful to the old revolutionary ideal of renovating ‘polis’ democracy and is broken by a reality which has no place for his ideals, not even on the level of poetry and thought.”²⁶

Lukacs is here referring to Marx’s notion that the heroic period of the French Revolution was the necessary enthusiastic break-through followed by the unheroic phase of market relations: the true social function of the Revolution was to establish the condition for the prosaic reign of bourgeois economy, and the true heroism resides not in blindly clinging to the early revolutionary enthusiasm, but in recognizing “the rose in the cross of the present,” as Hegel liked to paraphrase Luther, i.e., in abandoning the position of the Beautiful Soul and fully accepting the present as the only possible domain of actual freedom. It is thus this “compromise” with social reality which enabled Hegel’s crucial philosophical step forward, that of overcoming the proto-Fascist notion of “organic” community in his *System der Sittlichkeit* manuscript and engaging in the dialectical analysis of the antagonisms of the

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24 Ibid., p. 138.

25 Ibid., p. 139.

26 Lukacs 1968, p. 137.

bourgeois civil society. It is obvious that this analysis of Lukacs is deeply allegorical: it was written a couple of months after Trotsky – another figure that appears in Glick’s book - launched his thesis of Stalinism as the Thermidor of the October Revolution. Lukacs’s text has thus to be read as an answer to Trotsky: he accepts Trotsky’s characterization of Stalin’s regime as “Thermidorian,” giving it a positive twist - instead of bemoaning the loss of utopian energy, one should, in a heroically-resigned way, accept its consequences as the only actual space of social progress... For Marx, of course, the sobering “day after” which follows the revolutionary intoxication signals the original limitation of the “bourgeois” revolutionary project, the falsity of its promise of universal freedom: the “truth” of the universal human rights are the rights of commerce and private property. If we read Lukacs’ endorsement of the Stalinist Thermidor, it implies (arguably against his conscious intention) an utterly anti-Marxist pessimistic perspective: the proletarian revolution itself is also characterized by the gap between its illusory universal assertion of freedom and the ensuing awakening in the new relations of domination and exploitation, which means that the Communist project of realizing “actual freedom” necessarily failed – or does it?

There is a third way beyond the alternative of principled self-destruction and compromise: not some kind of “proper measure” between the two extremes but focusing on what one might call the “point of the impossible” of a certain field. The word “synthesis” is here totally misleading: the concluding moment of a dialectical is not some kind of a middle term between the two extremes, maintaining what is good in both of them and combining them into a balanced unity, but a total change of the terrain. My friends from Israel reported to me enthusiastically how, in a Palestinian village near Jerusalem, there were joint demonstrations in which veiled Palestinian women marched together with provocatively dressed Jewish lesbians... My reaction was that yes, such events are miracles, but, as all miracles, they are rare, they will forever remain marginal: it is illusory to see in them a germ of future solidarity, of a common front that will be built through patient work and will gradually encompass majority. This, of course, does not mean that the battle is lost in advance – it means that a much more radical change is needed where the basic identity of each of the two will be thoroughly transformed: Palestinian women will have to drop their identity as part of the traditional Palestinian community, and Israeli women will have to drop their middle-class multicultural stance. The third term of the Hegelian “synthesis” is something genuinely new, an invention which breaks the deadlock of the existing situation.

The great art of politics is to detect it locally, in a series of modest

demands which are not simply impossible but appear as possible although they are de facto impossible. The situation is like the one in science-fiction stories where the hero opens the wrong door (or presses the wrong button. . .) and all of a sudden the entire reality around him disintegrates. In the United States, universal healthcare is obviously such a point of the impossible, in Europe, it seems to be the cancellation of the Greek debt, and so on. It is something you can (in principle) do but *de facto* you cannot or should not do it — you are free to choose it *on condition you do not actually choose it*.

Today's political predicament provides a clear example of how *la verite surgit de la meprise*, of how the wrong choice has to precede the right choice. The general epistemological premise that underlies this necessary role of misrecognition can be nicely rendered by the reversal of the well-known phrase "You have to be stupid not to see that!" – *la verite surgit de la meprise* means that, precisely, you *have* to be stupid to see that, i.e., as Lacan put it, *les non-dupes errent*, those who are not duped are in the wrong (this is the best critical description of cynics). In order to arrive at the truth, one has to be taken into an illusion - just recall how emancipatory politics can only be sustained by a belief into the (in some sense obviously "illusory") axiom of universal justice.

In principle, the choice of the Leftist politics is the one between social-democratic reformism and radical revolution, but the radical choice, although abstractly correct and true, is self-defeating and gets stuck in Beautiful Soul immobility: in Western developed societies, calls for a radical revolution have no mobilizing power. Only a modest "wrong" choice can create subjective conditions for an actual Communist prospect: if it fails or if it succeeds, it sets in motion a series of further demands ("in order to really have universal healthcare, we also need...") which will lead to the right choice. There is no short-cut here, the need for a radical universal change has to emerge through such mediation with particular demands. To directly begin with the right choice is therefore even worse than to make a wrong choice, it is a version of the Beautiful Soul, it amounts to a position of "I am right and the misery of the world which got it wrong just confirms how right I am." Such a stance relies on a wrong ("contemplative") notion of truth, it totally neglects the practical dimension of truth. In his (unpublished) *Seminar XVIII* on a "discourse which would not be that of a semblance," Lacan provided a succinct definition of the truth of interpretation in psychoanalysis: "Interpretation is not tested by a truth that would decide by yes or no, it unleashes truth as such. It is only true inasmuch as it is truly followed." There is nothing "theological" in this precise formulation, only the insight into the properly dialectical unity of theory and practice in (not only)

psychoanalytic interpretation: the "test" of the analyst's interpretation is in the truth effect it unleashes in the patient. This is how we should also (re)read Marx's Thesis XI: the "test" of Marxist theory is the truth effect it unleashes in its addressee (the proletarians), in transforming them into emancipatory revolutionary subjects. The true art of politics is thus not to avoid mistakes and to make the right choice, but *to commit the right mistake*, to select the right (appropriate) wrong choice. In this sense, Glick writes that "the revolutionary leadership as vanishing mediator – the only responsible vanguard model. Political work in order to qualify as radical work should strive toward its redundancy."²⁷ He combines here a sober and ruthless insight into the necessary tragic twists of the revolutionary process with the unconditional fidelity to this process; he stands as far as possible from the standard "anti-totalitarian" claim that, since every revolutionary process is destined to degenerate, it's better to abstain from it. This readiness to take the risk and engage in the battle, although we know that we will probably be sacrificed in the course of the struggle, is the most precious insight for us who live in new dark times.

We should thus fully accept the fact that, since revolutionary activity is also not a self-transparent act but an act caught in conditions of alienation, it unavoidably includes tragic reversals, acts whose final outcome is the opposite of what was intended. One should follow here Badiou who elaborated three distinct ways for a revolutionary movement to fail. First, there is, of course, a direct defeat: one is simply crushed by the enemy forces. Then, there is a defeat in the victory itself: one wins over the enemy (temporarily, at least) by way of taking over the main power-agenda of the enemy (the goal is to take state power, either in the parliamentary-democratic – Social-Democratic - way or in a direct identification of the Party with State – as in Stalinism). On the top of these two versions, there is perhaps the most authentic, but also the most terrifying, way: guided by the correct instinct telling it that every solidification of the revolution into a new state power equals its betrayal, but unable to invent and impose on social reality a truly alternative social order, the revolutionary movement engages in a desperate strategy of protecting its purity by the "ultra-leftist" resort to all-destructive terror. Badiou aptly calls this last version the "sacrificial temptation of the void":

"One of the great Maoist slogans from the red years was 'Dare to fight, dare to win.' But we know that, if it is not easy to follow this slogan, if subjectivity is afraid not so much to fight but to win, it is because struggle exposes it to a simple failure (the attack didn't succeed), while

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²⁷ Glick 2016, p. 12.

victory exposes it to the most fearsome form of failure: the awareness that one won in vain, that victory prepares repetition, restauration. That a revolution is never more than a between-two-States. It is from here that the sacrificial temptation of the void comes. The most fearsome enemy of the politics of emancipation is not the repression by the established order. It is the interiority of nihilism, and the cruelty without limits which can accompany its void.”²⁸

What Badiou is effectively saying here is the exact opposite of Mao’s “Dare to win!” – one *should* be afraid to win (to take power, to establish a new socio-political reality), because the lesson of the XXth century is that victory either ends in restoration (return to the State power logic) or gets caught in the infernal cycle of self-destructive purification. This is why Badiou proposes to replace purification with subtraction: instead of “winning” (taking over power) one maintains a distance towards state power, one creates spaces subtracted from State... Is, however, this solution adequate? What about heroically accepting the risk of self-obliteration? This is the reason Lukacs (surprisingly for a Marxist) fully endorses Hegel’s refusal to engage in any projects of a better future society: “That Hegel stops at the present is related /.../ to the most profound motives of his thinking – to be precise, of his historico-dialectical thinking.”²⁹ In other words, it is precisely Hegel’s silence about future which opens up the space for it, namely for a future that is not just an extrapolation of the predominant tendencies of the present but the unforeseeable result of risky decisions.

We thus need to subtly change the formula of the big revolutionary Event as the moment of final Judgment when, as Benjamin put it, even the past of the failed revolutionary attempts will be redeemed, the moment first clearly formulated in *Joe/ 3:14*: “Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.”³⁰ But the decision is always risky, with no ontological guarantee, destined to fail and to be repeated. It can happen that Lord (or whatever agent stands for him) makes the wrong judgment, that the wrong multitude is finished off in the valley of decision. The true emancipatory work of love enters at this tragic moment.

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28 Badiou 2009, p. 28.

29 Lukacs 1968, p. 136,

30The “valley of decision” is the location of God’s inflictions on his enemies at the moment of Armageddon: the armies of the world will gather into this valley where God will announce his final judgement and destroy his enemies.

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