

# Stalin Beyond Stalin: A Paradoxical Hypothesis of Communism Alexandre Kojève Boris Groys Alexei Penzin

## **Abstract:**

The article aims to undertake an immanent critique of the two heterodox interpretations of Stalin, by Alexandre Kojève and Boris Groys, and their contextualisation in terms of recent theoretical debates on the idea of communism. The article argues that there are implicit correlations of those two interpretations made at different times – in 1930-1940s in France and 1980s-2000s in Germany – by the philosophers-émigrés who, in different biographical ways, had an insider's perspective on Stalinism. Kojève's famous concept of "the end of history" was initially addressed to Stalin as "world-historical individual" and the USSR as "universal and homogenous" State, which he defines as a post-historical reality. He also presented Stalin as a post-historical "Sage" who is able to grasp the totality of contradictory positions. Groys radicalises these assumptions in his theory of "really existing" communism as a social formation founded not in the "rule of economics" but in language and in paradoxical thinking, far from any stereotypical views on Soviet theoretical dogmatism. Against the traditional Marxist view of communism as a society without the State (as an apparatus of class oppression), both Kojève and Groys insist on the notion of communism that is linked to an "altered" State – a "homogenous and universal State" in Kojève, and a paradoxical "non-State" in Groys.

## **Keywords:**

Kojève, Groys, Stalin, communism, "linguistic turn", paradox, dialectics, "end of history", the State.

"Could you explain why in the elections to the Soviets you have only one candidate in each council?"

–This is not determined by legislation. The law does not limit the number of candidates. This is a historical tradition. Note also, in bourgeois states each party has only one candidate in a district. The general number of candidates, as a rule, corresponds to a number of parties participating in elections. We have only one party – the Communist Party, and if it delegates a candidate, it is only one for each seat in a Soviet. "

USSR. 100 Questions and Answers, Moscow, APN, 1981<sup>1</sup>.

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Translated from Russian by the author.

Strangely enough, Boris Groys' short book, *The Communist Postscript* and other related works while offer quite an original and provocative philosophical idea of the "really existing" communism in its Soviet version, have received relatively little attention – critical or whatever – in the revival of theoretical debates on communism since the late 2000s.<sup>2</sup> A part of these debates addressed the challenge of rethinking the Soviet legacy, including such unavoidable characters as Stalin, who is one of the central figures of Groys' theorizing in this book as well as in his earlier books such as *Total Art of Stalinism*.<sup>3</sup> The regrettable inattention to this contribution could be explained by the contexts where usually Groys' work functions, namely, art theory and media theory, which now are not linked *directly* to the recent political-philosophical debates about the idea of communism. Perhaps due to this high visibility in the contemporary art context and his role (which is often perceived as a kind of intellectual "agent provocateur") some of his political-philosophical claims have been muted and perceived less seriously. But they definitely deserve attention, as well as their links to other layers of his work, which are not reducible to the subtle delights of art or media theory but are an original contribution to contemporary philosophy.

In this article I would like to offer an immanent critique of key arguments of Groys, presented mainly in *The Postscript*, but with further reference to some other key works and contexts, as well relating them to the arguments of the important and earlier theorist of Stalin, the philosopher Alexandre Kojève. Like cinematic exit titles that usually say something like "no animals were killed during the production of this film," I would like also to stress that politically this article has nothing to do with any pro-Stalinist stance, which still can be discerned today among various marginal cohorts of the Left. The figure of Stalin is taken rather as an enormous index of all the theoretical and practical impasses of the communist project, which makes it deserving of continued theoretical reflection that would go against the grain of those sad commonplaces of mainstream liberal thought, but also against the moments of conventional and orthodox thinking on the Left.

To add another preliminary (as most of the argument has a rather

2 Groys 2009. Of course there were dozens of short reviews published in academic or cultural periodicals, which briefly summarize some points of the book but to my knowledge there was no extended reflections or criticisms.

3 The debate includes among others the books from the Verso series with an attractive title 'Pocket Communism', such as "Communist Hypothesis" by Alain Badiou and "Communist Horizon" by Jodi Dean, as well as other books and the proceedings to several conferences 'The Idea of Communism' initiated and edited by Slavoj Žižek and his collaborators.

philosophical-political nature) I do not refer specifically to recent historical research on Stalin for example the works by the American historian Stephen Kotkin and the Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk.<sup>4</sup> Whilst Khlevniuk's biography provided very informed and thorough factual account of Stalin, he still operates within an unproblematic liberal paradigm of the "Stalin-pathological-monster" kind. One of Kotkin's key points is that despite new archival sources, opened up after the collapse of the USSR, there is no evidence that Stalin used Marxism simply as a guise for his pathological 'will to power' as he has usually been presented. He claims: "The fundamental fact about him was that he viewed the world through Marxism."<sup>5</sup> In Kotkin this strong claim is accompanied by many tendentious elements and, as one commentator suggests, with an implicit and familiar assumption that any Marxism would indeed lead to the Gulag, terror, etc. – which is definitely close to classic post-Cold War ideology.<sup>6</sup> Despite tendentiousness, Kotkin's perspective is still interesting in the context of the present article because it matches exactly with Groys' reinterpretation of Stalin's thinking, which for him was a part of a paradoxical dialectical tradition in European philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

*The Communist Postscript*, the most advanced part of Groys' philosophical assessment of Stalin, is not exactly "dynamite" but it is still quite an explosive thing, which aims at the subversion of many clichés about "real communism" and its philosophical foundations, via a dense sequence of striking paradoxes. These intellectual operations definitely contest the mainstream ideological consensus about the Soviet past (*The Postscript* may even provoke in readers somehow euphoric and hilarious light-heartedness that contrasts to the heavy weight of the vicissitudes of USSR's history). Prohibition, as we know from George Bataille's oeuvre, is logically tied to its transgression accompanied, as this, by figures of festivity and sacrifice. The exact effects of transgression projected into

4 Kotkin 2014 and Khlevniuk 2015. For an excellent critical reflection on those recent studies of Stalinism, as well as a deep insight into the current post-Soviet perception of Stalin which is far from liberal Western mainstream see Tony Wood 'Lives of Jughashvili' in *New Left Review* 95, September-October 2015, pp. 133-150.

5 Quoted in Tony Wood, p. 137.

6 Tony Wood, p. 141.

7 If this claim that Stalin were a Marxist "inside" would be proven, this raises the question what are the specific political and theoretical errors which can be named and articulated within critical Marxist conceptual framework? But this of course does not necessarily presume that Marxism if it attempted to be realised practically becomes one Big Error that unavoidably leads to another Great Terror. For an interesting and elaborated recent conceptualisation of the question of "error" in the Marxist philosophy, see Roberts 2011.

the theoretical-ideological field can be observed at work in the case of Groys' book. After all, Groys wants to present the Stalinist *diamat* as the highest possible intensity of speculative thought, and to present the whole USSR experience as the only possible way of actualising the idea of communism, as "real communism" in a both literal and "metaphysical" sense of these words and the concepts behind them. This claim might confirm his reputation of an intellectual agent-provocateur, but while putting his general understanding of Stalinism and its philosophy *diamat* into the context of recent debates I hope to highlight the serious and potentially productive core of Groys' work, despite my criticism of many points of his argument. Without this work of interpretation Groys' theories of Stalin and USSR indeed may look like a form of conceptual play or a 'textual artwork'. In the first part of this essay, it will be useful to give a short overview of the pre-existing context of Groys' recent ideas on Stalin and "really existing" communism, as well as to discuss his relation to the famous philosophical "Stalinist," Kojève, to whom, in my view, the account of Groys is highly indebted.

## II.

Already in late 1980s Groys had elaborated his contentious but well-known thesis about the logic of continuity between the revolutionary artistic avant-garde and Stalinist "socialist realism" – against the view widely accepted both by liberal ideology and the Left critique, which states that the latter was just a tragic and violent interruption of the experiment, a regressive return to traditional art and culture put to the service of State propaganda, and the low tastes of the illiterate mass of poor and working class people. But, according to the paradoxical logic of this continuity, being himself an artist in his own league, Stalin did not betray, destroy or repress the Soviet art of the 1920s but rather, literally, *sublated it to life*, radicalising its stakes in his sovereign acts of transforming the reality of the USSR – in exactly to same way the artist was actually dreamed of doing in the leftist artistic avant-gardes. In this sense Stalin was the true successor of Malevich or Tatlin.<sup>8</sup> Actually, art was so fully captured by "life" in the Stalinist model of "socialist realism" that it left no space for any formal or autonomous definition of art adopted by "bourgeois" modernism. So this is why art looked like kitsch, or an anti-aesthetic for external "western" observers who were not able to realise that the "sublation of art to life" was already a *fait accompli* in USSR. Hence socialist realism art is not another interesting theory or a sophisticated aesthetic-political programme anymore but just bare

<sup>8</sup> Groys 1992. See a critique of Groys' views on political and aesthetic dimensions of the Soviet avant-garde in my article 'The Biopolitics of the Soviet Avant-Garde' (published in Pedagogical Poem. The Archive of the Future Museum of History, Marsilio Editori, 2014).

reality. Groys summarised the gist of his argument as follows:

"Under Stalin the dream of the avant-garde was in fact fulfilled and the life of society was organized in monolithic artistic forms, though of course not those that the avant-garde itself had favoured".<sup>9</sup>

According to Groys in *The Total Art of Stalinism*, all features of the radical avant-garde of the 1920s were somehow continued in Stalinist culture and society including the notorious show-trials of "wreckers" and "enemies of the people." Since, they represented the "destructive" side of the avant-garde in its relation to traditional culture. Moreover the double face of the artist as a new "creator" which occupies the divine place of God, shares at the same time some attributes of its devilish counter-part. In the words of the author:

"This new cult of the protean "dialectical demiurge" that succeeded the traditional Christian cult of a God who was uniquely incarnated and retained his self-identity perhaps consummates the avant-garde's most important creative impulse, which was to bring forth the superindividual, extrapersonal, and collective in art, to transcend the limits of the earthly, mortal "creative individuality."<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly enough, the concept of the "artist-demiurge," with its implicit political theology, was addressed long ago in the work by Carl Schmitt. In his "Political Romanticism" (1919) he depicts the romantic artist or writer in his political dimensions exactly in this way – as an "occasionalist" who, similarly to the doctrine's argument about God's will, uses real events including political events, as plastic material for another sovereign creative act.<sup>11</sup> Linked to this implicit complex of notions, the whole idea of Stalin as an "artist" and his actions as "total artwork," or Gesamtkunstwerk (in original German the book's title was 'Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin') refers to the post-romanticist Wagnerian thinking about the "total artwork", which is the work of art that exceeds any genre or any existing artworks being an operatic synthesis of all art techniques and means.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 9. Some other early texts stressed this general approach to Stalinism as "aesthetic phenomenon" developed until the latest works, for example "The Problem of Soviet Ideological Practice" (Studies in Soviet Thought, Vol. 33, No. 3, Apr., 1987, pp. 191-208), and "Stalinism as Aesthetic Phenomenon" (Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture, ed. by A. Efimova and L. Manovich, pp. 115-126, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> Schmitt 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Discussions of Wagner and the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk in its relation to contemporary art, media and politics are frequent in recent essays such as 'Genealogy of Participatory Art' ("Introduction to Antiphilosophy", pp. 200-217) and some others.

Driven to its extreme, this contentious earlier conception claims that this broadly understood field of the aesthetical (in its specific form of the avant-garde) shaped the basis of the whole mode of political existence of Stalin. This model can be qualified as “meta-political,” to use the critical term coined by Jacques Rancière, as this model explains the political from some “fundamental” and different ground (the aesthetic project of “total work of art”), which is considered as prior to the political.<sup>13</sup> At another page Groys claims Stalin to be “the artist-tyrant who succeeded the philosopher-tyrant typical of the age of contemplative, mimetic thought...”<sup>14</sup>

Most of the criticisms of the book (that was acknowledged as an “event” in Soviet Studies and intellectual history) were addressed to several factual errors in Groys’ account of Stalinist culture, which tended to take the form of an empirical history’s protest against provocative theoretical overgeneralisations as well as misunderstanding of the philosophical nature of his argument. There were also other, more political and conceptual criticisms, mainly from the Left, that were of course addressed to the scandalous contamination of the “authentic” Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s and Stalinist art. It makes sense to put aside for a while those criticisms, and to mention other important and little noticed aspects of this initial model of understanding of Stalinism in Groys’ earlier work.

Another significant point of his interpretation was the famous theme of the “end of history” or “post-history” presenting its relation to the past not as a simplistic and conservative return to traditional forms but rather, a different, much more radical stance based on the idea that Stalinist culture was a kind of “Judgment Day” to save progressive or proto-communist artworks of the past and abandon completely all others, including still existing “bourgeois art” outside of the USSR:

“...Stalinist culture was not merely culture in the making, but represented instead the mature, posthistorical culture for which the “capitalist encirclement” was simply an external, moribund formation fated to disappear together with the entire “history of the class struggle.”<sup>15</sup>

It is remarkable that at the moment of the originally published book’s version in German (1988), the “end of history” had a different meaning, given that the USSR still existed, though in its last years, and Fukuyama’s “trump of doom” proclaiming the triumph of liberal

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13 Rancière 1999, pp. 61–95.

14 Groys 1992, p. 36.

15 Groys 1992, p. 41-42.

democracy worldwide was not audible yet. In his later works Groys actually develops this theme in his research on Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968), the French philosopher of Russian origin, and famous interpreter of Hegel’s work who in his reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was the first who stressed the theme of “the end of history.” Of course, the account of Kojève was much more sophisticated than its liberal appropriation. To begin with, the end of history was not the end of historical events. In his theorising of “the end of history” Kojève made a subtle distinction between achievement as a real change in the world in terms of the emergence of something new, and “success”, as rather a personal popularity or a project’s visibility and recognition.<sup>16</sup> The end of history makes impossible “achievement” (as production of some true novelty, or the real change of the social order) leaving us only with the idea of “success” which has no objective correlates in real change of social and political reality.

### III.

To further our argument we need to make a short excurses in Kojève’s paradoxical theories of the end of history as well as to outline his extravagant attitude towards Stalin following some clues of Groys’ texts dedicated to the French-Russian thinker, but also somehow correcting some of his accounts.

According to his views on the “end of history,” Kojève himself partly suspended his engagement with philosophy after World War II but he was still continuing to work on his manuscripts; almost all were published posthumously. More precisely, he left his philosophical studies “for weekends,” in order to become an official and also a photographer – a bureaucrat and an ideologist of the future European Union who travelled extensively and who took many photographs of the places he visited, including Stalin’s Moscow and post-WW2 Tokyo. What Kojève was looking for was a true paradigm of the post-historical order. He believed that the Hegelian Master-Slave struggle for recognition was over and a post-historical moment already had its *incipit* in 19<sup>th</sup> century after the Napoleonic wars which brought to Europe the idea of the “universal and homogeneous State,” ending the combat of the Master and the Slave and guaranteeing the rights and equal recognition to all citizens. In Kojève’s words, the State is universal because it is “nonexpandible” and it is homogenous in the sense of being “nontransformable”; it has no “advanced” centre and no “backward” periphery and no class antagonisms – or, more precisely, it is classless.<sup>17</sup> But the fatal end of

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16 Groys 2012, p 38.

17 Kojève 1980, p. 95.

history itself was not recognised yet, and in his re-reading of Hegel, Kojève hoped to extend the awareness of this.

In early 1941, Kojève finished a long manuscript in Russian, which was his first attempt to outline his own “System of Knowledge”, partly reflecting the contents of his lectures on the *Phenomenology*. He passed it to the Soviet consulate in Paris as he hoped to publish it in the USSR and maybe draw the attention of its supreme leader to its existence. Contemporary commentators support the hypothesis that the parcel also contained practical, managerial advice to Stalin, maybe put into a separate “letter”.<sup>18</sup> This contact with the embassy most likely launched the whole story about Kojève being a “KGB spy” (i.e. a spy devoted to Stalin), which is not proven until today.<sup>19</sup> Several months later, after the beginning of the German invasion of the USSR, the consulate building was destroyed in a fire and the typewritten manuscript was incinerated. But a handwritten draft version was kept in the office of his friend and admirer Georges Bataille and then moved to Kojève's archive at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France where it was rediscovered in the early 2000s.<sup>20</sup> In a recently published fragment of the manuscript Kojève explicitly associates the end of history, i.e. the precondition for a completed (or absolute) system of knowledge, with the achievement of communism:

“This presumes only that the humanity will achieve at some point an ideal, i.e. final state of political life (as we know, communist one). At this moment, history (in general sense of the word) indeed will stand still – there will be no wars, revolutions or any changes of social order anymore. The history will move from the real world into (historical) books. As if the humanity, stalled in its real development, had moved to repetition of path, which it already left behind, studying its (completed) history. This way,

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18 See Hagar Westati, Kojève's letter to Stalin, *Radical Philosophy*, 184, Mar/Apr 2014, p. 9.

19 On the KGB case for Kojève see for example the Epilogue in the book by Nichols 2007.

20 The manuscript is still not fully deciphered, as Kojève's handwriting is a very complicated one. For more details and comments in English, see a reconstruction of contents and contexts of the manuscript in Hagar Westati, Kojève's letter to Stalin, *Radical Philosophy*, 184, Mar/Apr 2014, p. 7-18. In Russian, see a deciphered and published fragment in Appendix: Alexandre Kojève. Introduction. *Sophia – Philosophy and Phenomenology // Istoriko-Filosofski Ejevodnik [History of Philosophy Yearbook 2007]*, Moscow: Institute of Philosophy, 2008, p. 276-325. I would like also to thank Evgeni V. Pavlov who has shared his internal review of the manuscript, which gives a basic insight into the structure and contents of its 949 pages. In his new article on the topic, which was published in the March-April issue of *Radical Philosophy* in 2016, Groys also refers to the text of the manuscript, highlighting some new and specific points of Kojève's interpretation of Stalin. This recent article proves our basic assumption that connects Kojève's work to Groys' understanding of Stalinism (Boris Groys, “Romantic bureaucracy. Alexander Kojève's Post-historical Wisdom,” *Radical Philosophy*, 196, 2016, p. 29-38).

the circle of real development in time gets full, showing by this that it has exhausted its possibilities.”<sup>21</sup>

But Kojève definitely does not mean here the communism in its classical theoretical sense elaborated by Marx – abolishment of private property and the bourgeois State, and then any subsequent State-form, as well as “free association of workers,” merging manual and intellectual labour, etc. The achievement of the “universal and homogenous” State (which, ironically, looks analogous to Antonio Negri's and Michel Hardt's global “Empire”) is definitely not a classical stateless communism. Though the theme of the “end of history” has been widely discussed since the 1980s in changing scholarly and political contexts, and has been harshly criticised by the Left or enthusiastically praised by the liberal ideological mainstream at different times, one particular aspect was hardly discussed seriously at all – its relation to a very special name: Stalin.<sup>22</sup>

Until his death in 1968 Kojève called himself a “strict Stalinist” (“*stalinien de strict observance*”) meaning that in spite of atrocities, Stalin and his State is the contemporary paradigm for “the end of history,” in the same way that his reading of Hegel updated the original system. In his friendship circle, which included the liberal sociologist Raymond Aron, this gesture was not taken seriously and was considered as an eccentric joke or provocation to “*épater les bourgeois*.”<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, both the

21 Alexandre Kojève. Introduction. *Sophia – Philosophy and Phenomenology // Istoriko-Filosofski Ejevodnik [History of Philosophy Yearbook 2007]*, Moscow: Institute of Philosophy, 2008, p. 322. The translation is ours.

22 See also one of those few discussions, as well as an introduction to the Russian manuscript, in the recent article “Five-year plan of philosophy: Stalinism after Kojève, Hegel after Stalinism” by Siarhei Biareishyk (*Studies in East European Thought* 65 (3-4), 2013, p. 243-258.). The author makes an interesting point on an internal parallel in development of Stalin's own thought presented in his early work “Anarchism or Socialism?” (1907) where Stalin goes into ontological debate on “being and consciousness” presenting “being” as material “content” of historically specific social conditions and “consciousness” as a their intellectual “form”. According to the Stalin's article, under capitalism or previous social formations the “form” and “content” do not match each other, their relations are antagonistic and this leads to open explosions in the time of revolutions and insurrections which are caused by conflict of “new content” and “old form”; but under communism the “form” and “content” should finally correspond to each other. That “ontological dualism” and its overcoming, as Biareishyk argues, is logically similar to Kojève's deduction of the end of history. Though in this early essay Stalin, quoting Marx and Engels, does re-confirm the classical thought on communism as a stateless formation, which is definitely not compatible with the idea of “universal and homogeneous State” in Kojève. Actually, Stalin quotes almost the same passages from “Anti-During” and from “The Poverty of Philosophy”, which 10 years later Lenin will use in his “State and Revolution”. But Stalin adds to this an intriguing note, arguing that for “administering public affairs” even under communism the emancipated proletariat still would need a “central statistical bureau” as well as regular meetings and congresses “the decisions of which will certainly be binding upon the comrades in the minority until the next congress is held” (see the essay “Anarchism or Socialism?” at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1906/12/x01.htm>).

23 Nichols 2007, p. 51.

liberal anti-communists like Raymond Aron or his conservative friends, like Leo Strauss, as well as the contemporary post-Soviet researchers working on Kojève – as a rule, anti-communist – tend to have this position, pointing out that Kojève was well-informed about the empirical facts of the atrocities and of the dominant mediocrity of the late Stalinist regime, suggesting that such a brilliant and deep mind could not be deceived (basically saying “he was not an idiot”)<sup>24</sup>.

Indeed, the only short text which documents Kojève's reflections on the Soviet regime based on his three week sojourn in Moscow in 1957, is quite sober if not to say cynical about the empirical reality of post-Stalin USSR. Kojève emphasizes that there are no exceptional differences between the American and the Soviet people; the latter are just living a poorer life, but also want to live in the post-historical way, i.e. wealthy and peaceful. He even claims, in a very paradoxical manner, that the US and the USSR are the two countries *without* Communist Parties. This may sound like an absurd counterfactual statement given that in the USSR the Communists were the *only* Party. But Kojève was proposing a dialectical argument: there is no Communist Party in the Soviet Union because its main goal, such as the destruction of the bourgeoisie and nationalisation of property was already achieved under Stalin – so the Communist Party becomes under these conditions a “post-historical” formation. At the same time, in his report, Kojève re-states explicitly his philosophical parallel between the “grand Stalin” and Napoleon.<sup>25</sup> This means that his core statement that Stalin was the same figure of the “end of history” in the twentieth century as Napoleon was in the nineteenth century did not change at all before his death in 1968.<sup>26</sup>

According to Groys' interpretation, Kojève was inspired not only by an “anthropological” re-reading and privileging of Hegel's *The*

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24 There is also a direct witness in Raymond Aron's memoirs: “In 1938 or 1939, when he declared himself a “strict Stalinist,” was he sincere, or more precisely, in what sense was he sincere? <...>. That red Russia was governed by brutes, its very language vulgarized, its culture degraded – he admitted all this, in private. Even more, he sometimes described it as a thing that was so obvious that only imbeciles could be unaware of it” (Aron 2008, p. 106-107).

25 See this claim in the publication titled “Moscow in 1957” in French, “Moscou : août 1967” where Kojève writes “...l'œuvre de Staline peut être comparée à celle de Napoléon” (Commentaire, Volume 16, Numéro 62, Été 1993, p. 274).

26 He reconfirms his Hegel / Napoleon = Kojève / Stalin formula in an interview given shortly before his death to Gilles Lapouge which was published in 1968. Though as he noted jokingly there is a slight difference between his and Hegel's biographical circumstances, “he did not have the advantage of seeing Stalin ride by on horseback under his window” (as quoted in Nichols 2007, p. 178).

*Phenomenology of Spirit*, but was also influenced by another source.<sup>27</sup> His dissertation written in Heidelberg under supervision of Karl Jaspers, was dedicated to the thought of the nineteenth century philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, a foundational figure in the whole tradition of pre-revolutionary Russian philosophy and theology.<sup>28</sup> As Groys argues, the key motives in Kojève's reading of Hegel – that of desire for recognition and the end of history – are directly influenced by the obscure and mystical readings by Solovyov, of the female figure of “Sophia” or Wisdom, as an object of the philosopher's desire, as well as his later apocalyptic thought.<sup>29</sup>

We cannot go into further detail about the framework of this text in the presentation of Groys' account of Kojève and his influences. But in order to understand “the idea of communism” in Groys' version it is important to emphasise the correlation between Stalin and the figure of the Kojévian “Sage,” the “Wise Man” who possesses the whole “system of knowledge” with all its contradictory points of view, which were shaped

27 The stereotypical view on Kojève's interpretation of Hegel as “anthropological” is highly questionable. Enough to say that he ends his reading of the last chapter of “Phenomenology” with the radical and unprecedented claim about “disappearance of Man at the end of history” which gave birth to all further critiques of humanism and essentialist anthropology in the French thought and to the idea of the “Death of Man” (the beginning of the famous footnote 6, before its being expanded and critically reflected in the second edition, page 158 of the curtailed Allan Bloom's edition of the Introduction). The same can be referred as an objection to the similar assessment in the following beautiful example from recently published documents. Martin Heidegger, in his private exchange with Hanna Arendt who, among other works, was sending to him the Introduction and some articles by Kojève, acknowledges Kojève's importance and traces of reading of “Sein und Zeit” in his work on Hegel. But again, Heidegger also says, that this reading is too anthropological: “Kojève has a rare passion for thinking. French thought of past few decades is an echo of these lectures. Even the abandonment of these talks is itself an idea. But Kojève only reads Being and Time as anthropology” (Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Letters: 1925-1975, NY, Harcourt, 2004, p. 133). By “abandonment” Heidegger means that the Introduction was edited and published not by the author of the lectures but by his friend, writer and poet Raymond Queneau, based on the students notes, Kojève's own notes, and annual “resumes des courses.” We cannot develop fully the argument against tagging Kojève's reading of Hegel (as well as of Heidegger) as exclusively anthropological but it still clear that not the “anthropogenic desire” but rather its abandonment at the end of history which leaves us with main problems of the unpublished “Sophia” manuscript that asks questions about what would be the post-historical communist State and its “wisdom” or “proletarian awareness”.

28 Groys, 2012, esp. p. 158-159. See also the chapter on Kojève in Geroulanos 2010, where the author explores the influence of Solovyov's theology as well.

29 Interestingly enough Groys is not critical to the obvious gendered or sexist elements implied into this extravagant theorisation of a philosophical “Eros.” Groys also does not mention that according to Solovyov's biographers and his own confessions, in his mystical experiences, the religious thinker was several times dramatically visited by a vision of Sophia herself; his philosophical desire of Wisdom was at least satisfied in a mystical-erotic phantasm, so his later rather apocalyptic visions of the end of history justify the Kojévian logic at a personal register. See Vladimir Solovyov, War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations, Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ, Lindisfarne Press, 1990 (originally published in 1900). In his dialogues Solovyov also mentions not just the idea of “the end of history” but also the “European United States” which – according to his detailed dramaturgical phantasmagoria of the future – must emerge in early XXI century, also accompanied with the revelation of a dark “Antichrist” who would be battled by the united humanity, so his prophecies had a happy end.

before the end of history.<sup>30</sup> The “Wise Man” does not take a particular position in any debate, as he is able to contemplate all contradictory points as well as their limitations at one glance, and at the same time, he is able to see their paradoxical integrity. His post-historical role is to support and promote the event of the end of history itself, or in Kojève’s own words it is to enable the “administering the end of history.”<sup>31</sup> According to the thinker, the “end of history” has already happened as an advanced paradigm but has not yet turned into a universal reality. At different times, for Kojève this paradigm was not only Stalin’s USSR, but also the consumerist society of the USA and the ritualistic snobbery of Japanese society.<sup>32</sup> So there is no certainty with what would be the “final” end of history, but Stalin’s figure is recurrent in this dimension of his thinking, until the last years. To give one more example, in the posthumously published *The Notion of Authority*, written in 1943, Kojève uses the example of Stalin as an illustration of one of four types of the “human authority,” he outlines: Father (the cause, whose power comes from the Past), Master (achieved through accepting “risk” and based, generally, on the dialectics of Master and Slave which happens in the Present), Leader (associated with “Project”, Prophecy and the Future) and Judge (associated with Eternity, Equity and Justice). Stalin is subsumed under the strongest category of Leader:

“Since there is the primacy of the Future, there is also (as we shall see) the primacy of the Authority of the Leader. Authority par excellence is that of the (political, religious, and so on) ‘revolutionary’ Leader with a universal ‘project’ (Stalin).”<sup>33</sup>

30 In Groys’ words, “It was Hegel who understood the historical role of Napoleon, and who functioned as the self-consciousness of Napoleon. In the same sense, Kojève understood himself as the self-consciousness of Stalin who, in his turn, repeated the historical action of Napoleon by introducing the universal and homogeneous state in Russia” (Introduction to *Anti-Philosophy*, London, Verso, 2012, p. 166). In his letter written in 1955 and addressed to another thinker with rather controversial reputation, Carl Schmitt, with whom they had been in a both friendly and scholarly correspondence, Kojève calls Stalin “industrialised Napoleon” (see Alexandre Kojève-Carl Schmitt Correspondence in Interpretation, Fall 2001, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 97).

31 Nichols 2007, p. 6. The author also refers to a conversation with Kojève which had taken place in 1960s, with quite an amazing example of such “administering”. Kojève talked about how in the “universal and homogeneous state”, the cultural legacy would have to be made equally available to all the humanity. Since a massive stream of tourists would spoil the cultural experience, for instance, of visiting Cathedral of Notre Dame, “he supposed that some technological solution would be achieved: probably some way of transporting Notre Dame all around the world to be viewed by whoever might wish to see it” (ibid).

32 See Kojève 1980, p. 75-99. A note on Japan was added to the second edition (p. 159-162). But certainly, at the moment of actual creation of Introduction to the Reading of Hegel as course of lectures in 1930s, the only paradigm figure of the end of history were only “world-historical individual” Stalin and the USSR.

33 Kojève 2014, p. 49.

Actually, in the *Phenomenology* Hegel never mentions the “Sage” or “wise Man”. The introduction of this figure is an original part of Kojève’s interpretation that portrays absolute Knowledge (“das absolute Wissen”) through a subjective figure who possesses it, i.e. first of all Hegel himself as author of the *Phenomenology* and *Greater Logic*, which became possible only because history came to its end. But the Sage is not a unique figure, as in the post-historical “homogenous and universal State” the Wisdom (or the “absolute Knowledge”) would be available to each of its citizens. Kojève is actually not fully clear about this last point. This might require distinguishing between Hegel as the “first Sage” and following “Sages,” including Kojève himself, as well as its historical counterpart, or “world-historical individual” (Stalin). This also hints towards an unknown technology of a “mass production of Sages” in the post-historical “universal and homogenous State.” In his manuscript “Sophia” Kojève interprets “Wisdom” as “awareness” or “self-consciousness” [soznatel’nost’] borrowing this term from the official Soviet political language, which positively refers to “conscious workers” who are well informed about questions of class struggle. These workers use the theoretical framework of dialectical materialism to understand their position in society and history. Such “conscious workers” were opposed to negative category of “unconscious” or “unaware” elements that do not possess the wisdom of diamat and tend to disrupt the collective movement towards communism.<sup>34</sup>

A critical discussion of the whole of Kojève’s interpretation, in its relation to Hegel’s text (one of the outcomes of which was the figure of “wise Man”) would require a space we definitely cannot allow within the framework of this article. From the point of view of the problem we just outlined, Groys’ interpretation conceals a subtler Kojévian analysis, while presenting the figure of Stalin as both the proper Sage and the “world-historical individual” who through his entire existence and action fulfils the end of history.<sup>35</sup>

In his further work, first of all, in the *Postscript*, Groys updates the Kojévian account, implicitly preserving his three interrelated key ideas. The first idea is that communism is (or was) the end of history; Fukuyamian liberalism with parliamentary democracy definitely is not the end. Of course, the definition of communism implied here is different

34 See “Romantic bureaucracy. Alexander Kojève’s Post-historical Wisdom,” *Radical Philosophy*, 196, 2016, p. 32.

35 In his latest publication on the theme, Groys corrects himself and phrases this subtle distinction as “duality” of the Sage, meaning the Sage-theorist and the Sage-practitioner which makes the Sage “imperfect” (“Romantic bureaucracy. Kojève’s Post-historical Wisdom,” *Radical Philosophy*, 196, 2016, p. 31).

from conventional Marxist accounts for which “real history” should *just begin* after the arrival of communism and leave behind the “prehistory” of all previous class-based social formations.<sup>36</sup> The second idea is that of the “Wise Man”: the end of history unleashes a logic or way of thinking of the “Wise Man,” who is not the spokesperson for any new standpoint but only contemplates various “one-sided” philosophical points of view, keeping his position as a “paradoxical” grasp of the totality of all possible positions. As Groys stresses, in the post-historical condition “the philosopher strives for success—specifically in literary output, or, today, media presence—but the Sage strives for achievement,” i.e. real change in the world and a paradoxical mastery over already existing “completed knowledge” with all its contradictory positions.<sup>37</sup> The third idea is that communism takes the form of a “universal and homogenous State.” As we have already emphasized, this is far from the classical Marxist account of communism as abolishing – “in the last instance” – the State, understood as an oppressive machine of class domination, most powerfully expressed in Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. The crucial addition that is introduced by Groys is based on the assumption that what distinguishes Soviet “really existing communism” from the social forms which co-existed historically with the USSR (i.e. “real capitalism”) is its ontological character which linked principally to language and discourse as its foundational reality. More in the vein of contemporary thought, Groys also stresses a specific temporal organisation of this reality, which is not a “stage of development” in the style of the logic of progress based on 19th century scientific positivism, but rather a violent and finite event that radically recombines social ontology on the basis of language, but in the end evacuates itself from history, leaving only a possibility of its recurrence.

Thus, not being a stage in a progressive line of development but an Event, the so-called “really existing” communism, the historical realisation of the idea with all its brutal facticity, the tragic and imperfect communism of the USSR (and of Stalin) proclaimed to be its only possible or fatal core model. This is definitely the most challenging point of Groys’ update to the idea of communism. Indeed, it operates as a kind of a perverted “communist Thatcherism” with its slogan “there is no alternative” but insofar as for those who aspire to communism there is no

36 “The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production - antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals’ social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation” (Marx 1975, p. 426).

37 Groys 2012, p. 39.

way to avoid Stalinism.<sup>38</sup> This claim definitely needs to be discussed in critical terms but with an attention to its suggested ontological form or paradigm, which still could be detached from specific historical facticity of Stalinism. But firstly, let us consider the arguments of the Postscript in more detail.

### III.

In the *Communist Postscript* – in spite of the earlier hypothesis of the “artist-tyrant” and with rather occasional mentions of Kojève without reference to the whole idea of the “end of history” and the “wise Man” – a “philosopher-tyrant” occupies the central place in theorizing the “really existing” communism.<sup>39</sup> To repeat this again, the *Postscript* is undoubtedly highly indebted to Kojève’s work; one could even claim that Kojève is a true “master” of Groys who continues several underdeveloped lines of his thought.<sup>40</sup> After linking Kojève’s ideas on Stalin’s momentum in communism to Groys, his text needs further contextualisation and interpretation within contemporary Marxist and radical thought. The text ought to be understood not just as a virtuoso book length joke, a conceptual artwork or another tour de force to “épater les bourgeois”, but rather as an original line of thought which stems both from the internal political experience of “really existing” communism and from the external position of a “paradoxical observer.” This line of thought attempts to extract from the vicissitudes of Stalinism a possible philosophical contribution to the idea of communism, not ignoring or rejecting it as a purely negative black hole.

38 Though this account sounds somehow more promising that the some of the late thoughts of Kojève, who in his later texts and papers sometimes goes really too far. For example, in “Colonialism from a European Perspective” (1957) where in particular he argues that in its current condition, the USSR has no unique features as a socialist State, and looks as a sort of pre-Fordist capitalism. That latter point is close to the theory of the “State capitalism” in USSR though it has disadvantage in relation to the American capitalism build on Henry Ford’s practice and managerial ideas; Kojève even considers Ford as a person who invented a response to the proletarianization and poverty of the worker’s conditions in classical capitalism thus being, paradoxically, a “Marxist” for 20<sup>th</sup> century”. See Alexandre Kojève, Colonialism from a European Perspective, in Interpretation, Fall 2001, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 115-128.

39 Originally, the Postscript was published in German in 2006.

40 Even on biographic level, Groys’s trajectory of a philosopher-émigré who left the late Soviet Union in early 1980s is quite similar; if one would have a look from an ironical distance, his practical involvement as a curator of several important exhibitions looks as a structural parallel to Kojève’s involvement in administrative activity and his photographic amusements. In the days of his youth in 1920s, living in Heidelberg and then in Berlin, Kojève wrote in Russian a manuscript called “Diary of a Philosopher” (it was just recently translated into German); in mid-1980s, living in Germany, and most likely not being aware of Kojève’s title around that time, Groys published in Russian his own “Diary of a Philosopher” [“Dnevnik Filosofova”] whose records are dated from 1985 to 1986 (Paris, Syntaxis, 1989).

The stages – the first is “aesthetic” and the second one is “philosophical” – of the “reevaluation of all values” are still quite consistent. The aesthetic dimension with its effect of de-realization prepares the ground for bracketing the historical experience of the USSR that focuses only on its shiny “official” surface, suspends any subterranean critique or relativizes any aspect of this self-contained, almost absolute space. In its turn, this move shapes conditions for a serious rereading of the “Short Course” or Stalin’s work on linguistics, putting them in the history of philosophy, traced from its Greek origins. In this way, the approach adopted by Groys consists of interpreting Stalin and the USSR as they *are* on the surface of their own appearance, without any contamination by later critical discourses.

Methodologically, one can hardly say that Groys produces an “apology” or “defence” of Stalinism. Rather, it is a research procedure of suspension or neutralisation of any ideologically saturated critical description or value judgement. This, together with the implicitly assumed Kojévian speculative assertions of the “end of history” and “Wise Man,” opens a strange and paradoxical space of “Stalin beyond Stalin,” whose elusive significance is situated out of reach of historical contemporaries and today’s empiricist observers. This virtual space follows the logic which is akin to Kant’s famous statement that the French Revolution had different meanings for those who had been inside of its event, given that it was fraught with terror and various vicissitudes for its immediate participants, whereas for its external and enthusiastic observers it was a sublime abstraction of equality and freedom. In the case of Stalin, the sublime abstraction of that pure external observation is not one of freedom or even equality, but rather of the tremendous short circuit between the Idea of communism and *the process of its realisation*, which was the only process in the world between WWI and WWII which then became dominant paradigm of the “really existing” communisms.<sup>41</sup>

The series of paradoxical statements coined in the *Postscript* aimed to construct a logic which is structurally similar but materially different from those of “Total Art of Stalinism,” finding its point of departure not in the aesthetics of the Soviet avant-garde but in proper philosophical discourse. Groys’ main claim is that the dialectical materialism of Stalin’s “Short Course,” also known by its acronym *diamat*, and usually interpreted as the pinnacle of Soviet dogmatism, as well as its Subject (“Stalin-as-philosopher”) actually are not a degradation or destruction of the whole Hegelian-Marxian tradition but, on the contrary, give shape its most advanced continuation, and whose roots can be found in the

41 On the other hand, the conclusions of such a philosophical endeavour located in the space of the “Stalin beyond Stalin”, of course, can be re-functioned by mainstream ideologies, and in definitely reactionary way, starting from the familiar mantra “any communism leads to Gulag” of the liberal camp to, vice versa, various conservative and right-wing endorsements of Stalin as a “strong Leader”.

tradition originated in Classical Antiquity, in the battles of Socrates with Sophists.

Groys begins his argument by introducing quite a simple dichotomy of “discourse” (in the broad sense of spoken or written language) and “money” as two mediums that organize modern societies. Simply put – practical economy operates with numbers that does not constitute a language; meanwhile, politics and social life are doing so with words, utterances and statements. Anonymous, nonverbal and “anarchic” – to use well-known Marxist characterisations – market elements prevail in capitalism; at the same time, “language,” discourse, or any critical political statement cannot influence “money” as a non-human and non-verbal heterogeneous dominant medium. Economic success or failure cannot be predicted or contested with argumentation and discourse. Groys expresses the widespread contemporary cynical attitude towards the status of critique in capitalist society with cold apathy, being far from any parrhesiastic enthusiasm:

“Under capitalist conditions <...> every criticism and every protest is fundamentally senseless, for in capitalism language itself functions as a commodity, that is to say, it is inherently mute. Discourses of critique and protest are recognized as successful when they sell well, and to have failed when they sell poorly.”<sup>42</sup>

This bitter “wisdom” (definitely, not Hegelian or Kojévian) of the cynical neoliberal age lays the ground for conclusions according to which any critical discourse can be efficient only when there is no heterogeneity of language and society. So here we immediately arrive at the key point: *communism* is the name for a society in which politics, acting via the medium of language, subordinates all non-verbal economic activities which stop being a blind “fate,” or a non-verbal play of successes and failures. And the communist revolution is “the transcription of society from the medium of money to the medium of language.”<sup>43</sup>

Another word for this is “linguistification,” i.e. establishing the rule of language in the totality of social life. Twentieth century Western philosophy only theoretically proclaimed a “linguistic turn”; the “real communism” in the USSR was the “linguistic turn at the level of social praxis.”<sup>44</sup> In capitalism each discursive segment becomes a commodity; in communism each economic product or process becomes rather a discursive segment which corresponds not to market demands but to a communist vision, and which can be properly criticized in the

42 Groys 2009, p. XVII.

43 Ibid, p. XV.

44 Ibid.

homogeneous space of language. Here, according to Groys, we have to face the paradox – against all the mantras of “freedom of speech” in the bourgeois formally democratic society – only in the communist society an authentic and efficient verbal critique becomes possible (together with its own often violent uses and abuses):

“Criticism of capitalism does not operate in the same medium as capitalism itself. In terms of their media capitalism and its discursive critique are incompatible and so can never encounter each other. Society must first be altered by its linguistification if it is to become subject to any meaningful critique.”<sup>45</sup>

We shall pause at this point for some comments and clarifications. In his short book Groys does not provide any references or comments on the sources for his simple and efficient dichotomy of “language” and “money” (market) that he states as two ways of governing the society; this opposition may be seen – not without irony – as a sort of Cartesian insight into the cynical or even “nihilist” post-Soviet Reason reflecting its own not too distant past.<sup>46</sup> But it can be also seen, for example, as a replica, or an addition to the critical notion of “democratic materialism” which Alain Badiou harshly criticizes, opposing to it his philosophy of event and truth.<sup>47</sup> If “democratic materialism,” the core ontological element of neoliberal ideology, states that there are “only bodies and languages,” the post-communist Reason which probably has a sharper optics to observe capitalism as something relatively new and fresh for him, adds to this another word, “money.” If “events and truths” in Badiou are opposed to “bodies and languages,” the seemingly much more vulgar dichotomy of “language or money” can be read in a similar way. Because of the very loose and broad usage of the term “language” (or “discourse”) in Groys’ account, this may be not oppositional but equal to a “set of ideas” or “truths” as well. Thus, the alternative “truth or money” would also be a way to translate this opposition.

There are other legible references or structural parallels in recent

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45        *Ibid.*, p. XII.

46        A blurb written by Peter Osborne for back cover of another book by Groys (2014) quite wittily presents him as “the master of Slavic nihilism.” However, the exoticizing adjective “Slavic” can be replaced by the “post-Soviet,” meaning not a cultural or national identity but a historically subsequent social subject which has fully absorbed the complexity and paradoxical entanglements of the Soviet event, and strangely – or maybe dialectically – turned into the complete opposite of these complexities. In a sense it is true also because the post-Soviet capitalism is indeed a “nihilism” which destroys the previous cultural “superstructures” as not necessary, or just uses them as in an instrumental way; the relentless hunting for more “money” is the fundamental determination “in the last instance” of all political, geopolitical and social moves of the corrupted and cynical ruling class. Though of course, this is not so exceptional for the global neoliberal capitalism but still it has its own specific radicalness.

47        Badiou 2013, p. 1-9.

critical thought that articulate the ways of approaching capitalist modernity. To properly see the edifice that Groys built around Stalin, *diamat* and language, which otherwise might look too weird or too playful, it is worth providing more context and references.

1. The similar structure can be observed in Foucault's opposition of (written) Law characteristic of traditional sovereignty, and anonymously established Norm, which escapes any capture of language and establish itself as a crucial non-discursive mechanism of modern power. As Foucault claims, Norm is rather a supplement of traditional written Law, subordinating and rearranging it:

“The power of the Norm appears through the disciplines. Is this the new “law” of modern society? Let us say rather that, since the eighteenth century, it has joined other powers – the Law, the Word (Parole) and the Text, Tradition – imposing new delimitations upon them”.<sup>48</sup>

The written and rigid Law, which has linguistic nature, according to Foucault, is secondary in relation to non-verbal Norm as a flexible, tactical and permanently changing operator of power. In a similar way, if to phrase it in slightly different theoretical wording, under capitalism language is subordinated to the anonymous “element” of market / money which transforms critique, those spoken or written words, into a manageable commodity among others. The “normalisation” and later biopolitical power in Foucault definitely share with the “medium” of market / money its microscopic, anonymous and anti-Statist character, and further development of his analysis inevitably leads his study to the analysis of neoliberalism's monetarist policies, exactly because of these structural logics. Moreover, the main claim of recent ambitious collection “Foucault and Neoliberalism” edited by Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent is to show that Foucault was not just a pioneer of analysis of neoliberal theories in his lecture courses of 1970s but that his whole attitude to neoliberalism was rather more affirmative than critical. One of the authors of the collection points out exactly the link between the analyses of power undertaken by Foucault in the first half of 1970s, which moved from disciplinary power to the softer forms of the biopolitical “population management,” and his later interest in free-market thought as a neoliberal “governmentality” based on minimisation of State intervention and its theoretical and practical purification of the “rule of economics” in general.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, there is certainly an anti-neoliberal continuation of Foucault's analysis in the Italian radical thought made in dialogue with Guattari and Deleuze, as for example, the contemporary work by

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48        Foucault 1995, p. 184.

49        Foucault and Neoliberalism, ed. by Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent, 2016, p. 181.

the Italian theorist Maurizio Lazzarato, who, following those thinkers, distinguishes between “social subjection”, i.e. the ideological State apparatuses which operate via language, discourse and the “Law,” endowing the individual with a name, identity and position in the class system, and “machinic enslavement” based on non-verbal and pre-individual mechanisms of capturing attention, time, desire and body.<sup>50</sup> The latter non-verbal dimension of enslavement is definitely compatible with what Groys calls “money” or “market” as the non-verbal *medium* of capitalism.

2. Another reference that helps to unpack the seemingly “vulgar” dichotomy of language and money can be found in Groys’ own essay on Walter Benjamin where he interprets Benjamin’s fragment “Capitalism as Religion” (1923).<sup>51</sup> In this posthumously famous fragment Benjamin argues that religion is not simply one of the conditions of capitalism (Protestantism, according to the well-known thesis of Max Weber); capitalism is a religion itself. It is a “pure religious cult” which is characterised by several features such as – in particular relation to Groys’ argument – absence of any verbally expressed dogma. In proper discursive theology, argues Groys, the truth is supposed to be already disclosed and the theologian only needs to maintain and reproduce it.<sup>52</sup> The capitalism as religion has no verbal dogma; but paradoxically it retains a pure theological function of reproduction, without any original “truth.” Thus capitalism is a pure non-verbal practical exercise or reproduction of the market and money circulation without any interruption or “holidays”:

“Capitalism “does not need any additional discursive legitimization, since it makes the whole of the world, including the whole of speech, the temple of its cult; but for this very reason, capitalism cannot be criticized or refuted by discursive means.”<sup>53</sup>

In contrast to capitalism at its purest, described by Benjamin as a ritualistic non-verbal “cult,” traditional authority is founded in verbal “theology” with its truth claims (and communist power too, adds Groys). Groys sketches his own short genealogy of the arrival of the nonverbal power of money. He notes the obvious but probably not sufficiently theorised fact that both traditional power and its opposition express themselves via a verbal medium, and all social and political struggles

50 See Lazzarato 2014.

51 Groys 2012, p. 91-105.

52 Ibid, p. 93.

53 Ibid, p. 98.

– in the Hegelian-Kojèbian sense of struggle for recognition – “have to be waged, ultimately, by means of language.”<sup>54</sup> In the end, “the official theology of power” looses its positions to the critical discourse with its appeal of democratic public opinion and free discussion. But at the same time, this means “emancipation from any discourse whatsoever” together with any truth claims, and subordination to the nonverbal power of market and “money.” And here again Groys returns to Kojève, who – similar to Benjamin but of course via different paths – “interpreted modernity as a transition to total reproduction” as after Hegel one can just reproduce and repeat the *Phenomenology*.<sup>55</sup>

Although this discussion of Benjamin further illustrates the sophisticated background of the capitalism / communism divide derived from the dichotomy of “money” (or non-verbal cult of capitalism) and language in Groys texts, its relation to the previous discussion of Kojève and his emphasis on Stalin’s communism as the “end of history” is still not clear from the perspective of this text. From Groys perspective the “pure” capitalism as a non-discursive formation of market and “money” – established after the end of the social struggles for recognition and whose essence lays in pure ritualistic reproduction without any verbal dogma – looks like a post-historical phenomenon as well. And Kojève does not look like a Hegelian philosopher or even a “Sage” but rather as a “theologian” of Hegel who believes, without any doubts, that the absolute truth is achieved in the latter’s thought and it needs only some historical and theoretical adjustments, like putting Stalin in the place of Napoleon. And Groys, in turn, seems to be a “theologian” of Kojève – to use his own definition of theology – with regards to the latter’s particular interpretation of Hegel.

This also seems to reveal the powerful “imprinting” of the idea of the end of history amongst a whole generation of thinkers, which is larger than one can imagine. For example, the implicit or explicit belief – of course definitely far away from the right-wing Fukuyamian interpretation – shared, to various degrees, by contemporary Italian thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben or Paolo Virno, who in their philosophical versions of contemporaneity do imply the idea that the previously crucial opposition of history and nature is collapsing in the current capitalist order, and that we are living in a messianic time of the dismantling and “closing” of the whole traditional apparatus of power and theology/metaphysics. This theoretical conjuncture looks exactly as Kojève’s initial point proclaimed in his *Introduction to Reading of Hegel*, that the end of history means the disappearance of human history, a return to nature and animality

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid. p. 99.

as well as the deactivation of philosophical-theological apparatuses which became recorded and put to the storage of the *Phenomenology* as physically existing and reproducible book. Though in his later modification of this radical thought, some ritualistic devices would not allow to subvert the distinction of history and nature fully – which otherwise would mean the disappearance of humanity as such – leaving a space for a human existence just formally or ritualistically distanced from the natural being of the animal. This formal post-historical distance from nature allows the play and arts for the “last humans,” i.e. some aesthetical forms of life, which indeed resembles some of Marx’s notes on communism as merging various forms of labour and play.<sup>56</sup> This somehow points towards a possibility to re-appropriate and re-evaluate the notion of the “end of history” after several decades of contesting that claim, and probably to distance it from the neoconservative accounts of Kojève’s idea and to make it more explicit and critical in its use by the Left.

3. Finally, it can be said that the seemingly extravagant definition of the “real communism” as a society in which economy and all of social life is subordinated to politics with its medium of language or “discourse” cannot be considered as a new one at all. Since its origins, for the Marxist tradition of thought, communism means precisely the break with an economic enslavement of society that can only harden in the historical deployment of capitalist production (and has reached its peak in the current state of neoliberalism); it also means founding society on different, strictly non-economic principles. To give only one but very good textual example, in his early article “Old Culture and New Culture” (1920), after an analysis of capitalism as a formation where for the first time in human history economic rationality achieves its centrality in all social life, Georg Lukács simply identifies communism with “liberation from the rule of the economy” which should be followed by establishing the rule of culture.<sup>57</sup> Lukács develops this key idea throughout the whole text, arguing that it “...means above all the end of the domination of the economy over the totality of life. [...] In the last analysis the communist social order

56 And it is worth to note here that in the Italian context in general Kojève’s work enjoyed a lot of attention recently, compared with other contexts. There is a similar commentary about this structural influence of the “end of history” in recent critical collection of articles in the special issue of Angelaki on contemporary Italian thought, edited by Lorenzo Chiesa. Chiesa points out this shared implicit belief in the end of history; he continues that “the quasi-apocalyptic assumption that the current phase of capitalism is truly exceptional and irreversible – to put it bluntly, a certain extreme notion of epochality, if not of the end of history, is taken for granted in so far as the contemporary form of accumulation is deemed to cancel the distinction between biology and history” (Chiesa 2011, p.2).

57 See Lukács 1970, p. 22.

means the *Aufhebung* of the economy as an end in itself.”<sup>58</sup> The argument about communism as a sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the economy to the “rule of culture” (rather than politics) is structurally the same as Groys’ argument about the “linguistification” or founding society through the medium of language or “discourse” in a broad sense.

4. Last but not least, in his understanding of the altered ontological status of language as the core of Stalin’s and CCCP phenomena, Groys is highly indebted to the collective practice of Moscow Conceptualism, the circle of artists and intellectuals he belonged to while being in the Soviet capital in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and later. The school’s main practice was based on re-functioning the idioms of the Soviet ideological discourse, as well as in a massive para-philosophical production, both conversational and textual. It was also attentive to the innumerable trivia of Party slogans and propagandist common places which became an invisible and semi-erased part of late-Soviet everyday life, which the conceptualists filled with a new, bizarre, subversive, often just surprising and humorous meanings that eventually did not negate or criticise the linguistic reality of CCCP but just give it another spin.<sup>59</sup>

5. Similar definitions of communism as subordination of the “rule of economy” to the verbal discourse of politics were given both from the left and from the right of the political spectrum. This definition, if put very formally, embraces all the discourse about communism as “totalitarianism” (as subordination of all social and economic life to politics) beginning from the most intelligent versions such as Hannah Arendt’s, and monotonously continued in countless liberal mainstream textbooks on history and political theory. In his book, Groys produces an appropriation and re-evaluation of this thesis of liberal anticommunism, endowing it with a paradoxical twist.

#### IV.

Before coming to the conclusion, let us consider briefly the last key point of Groys’ paradoxical idea of the “really existing” communism, which finally takes into account the philosopher Stalin. After claiming that real communism was a society governed by language or discourse and not by the capitalist “rule of economic,” Groys asks – how is this rule of discourse is possible? What would be its historical or theoretical paradigms? The answer is: it happens via a specific “force of logic”

58 Ibid, p. 26. This definition of communism has its acute political relevance under today’s domination of neoliberalism, which is exactly the strongest and heaviest form of the “rule of the economy” over all aspects of “totality of life”.

59 As document for this context, see for example the book of conversations between Groys and the leading figure of the Moscow conceptualism Ilya Kabakov (Boris Groys, Ilya Kabakov, A Man who Flew into Space from his Apartment, Afterall Books, 2006).

brought by a paradoxical use of discourse.<sup>60</sup>The material apparatus of this logical coercion is the State, as after expropriation of all private property the State (a placeholder of all property), becomes a guarantee of the separation from economic and all private interests that might interfere with the concrete use of language. The main generator of the logical coercion that works through paradox is a specific form of dialectical materialism (aka *diamat*); and who is able to use it if not a philosopher? Hence the communist State is a State of philosophers:

“Soviet power must be interpreted primarily as an attempt to realize the dream of all philosophy since its Platonic foundation, that of the establishment of the kingdom of philosophy.”<sup>61</sup>

Groys stages his ambitious theory of the “logical coercion” taking as an example Plato’s Republic as a model of philosophical governance, and the dialogues where Socrates affirms his vision of philosophy in a polemic with the Sophists, and then through a series of excursuses and examples from key figures of Western philosophy until today, which probably still can be allowed in such a genre of short manifesto text. This is not an exact analysis of the texts but rather a large-scale sketch unfolded in several moves.

Firstly, according to Groys, the logical coercion or “the force of logic” is an effect of specific clarity, the lucidity of logical exposition of various paradoxes demonstrated by Socrates in Plato’s dialogues. This clarity is an exposition of contradictions in the speeches of Socrates’ opponents, the Sophists, which shows that their opinions are based on one-sidedness being determined by the play of private interests. But this does not mean that the philosopher’s speech is a coherent discourse in terms of formal logic. The goal of Socrates is not to oppose any particular opinion with a truthful and formally coherent discourse about universals. Likewise, Socrates is not a Wittgensteinian “therapist” who wants to “cure” the discourse by demonstrating its entanglement in metaphysical assumptions, and therefore is presented to abandon classical philosophy as a deformation of everyday language games. He “dwells” in paradox to affirm its unavoidability and its immense internal tension: “...a paradox consists in simultaneously holding A and not-A in the mind as true.”<sup>62</sup> He exposes the paradox itself that lays behind the surface of any seemingly non-contradictory statement or opinion, argues Groys:

“What Socrates actually shows is that no speech can avoid being contradictory. If we understand philosophical thinking to be the exposure of the inner logical structure of a discourse, then from the perspective

60 Maybe better translation would be not “the force of logic” but rather “the logical coercion”.

61 Groys 2009, p. 29.

62 Ibid, p. 16.

of genuine thinking, the logical composition of any discourse can be described in no other way than as self-contradiction, as paradox. *Logos* is paradox.”<sup>63</sup>

This way the philosopher resists the democratic “market of opinions” in whose framework any statements are possible, including the most stupid but still sellable ones. He demonstrates implicit contradictions imbedded in opinions; at the same time he himself does not pretend that his position is the truest. It is exactly this position that gives him the opportunity to claim power – as the paradox has maximal clarity and because of this it has some effect of force or coercion, mesmerising those who follow the paradoxical argument. As the Sophist hides paradoxical qualities of his discourse, this secret dimension gives room for private desires and interests. It is exactly this room that he sells as a commodity, as a discursive platform for pursuing particular interests under the guise of logical universality.

This is usually the Sophist, as presented in both the mainstream schoolbooks on the history of philosophy and in the proper scholarly works, who represents the figure of the producer of aporias and paradoxes.<sup>64</sup> Groys’ move here is to reclaim the philosopher as a producer of fundamental paradoxes, while picturing the sophist as a mercenary intellectual, who hides the paradox, selling his pseudo-coherent statements or opinions as commodities. As Groys argues, against this initial Socrates/Plato momentum, since Aristotle’s codification of logic, philosophy attempted to produce rules of coherence that would allow avoiding the exposure of the paradoxical core of any discourse.<sup>65</sup> The Socratic line of paradox was marginalised; or the paradox was presented rather as “evidence” which hides its paradoxical core as the source of the evidence. But this suppressed line of thought resurfaced again and again, for example in the existential and religious line of thinking initiated by Kierkegaard, who discovered the “paradoxes of faith” and stressed

63 Ibid, p. 6-7.

64 With some differences and nuances, the contemporary advanced advocates of sophistry’s relevance for contemporary philosophy maintain this position. See for example a recent influential account of sophistry in the work of Barbara Cassin, who carefully discusses many famous examples of paradoxes as well as the whole “paradoxology” while asserting that it was marginalized by dominant ontological and phenomenological model of philosophy since Parmenides. Groys account of course is much shorter in terms of its historical-philosophical elaboration but it does what Cassin does not – it stresses the connections of sophistry to the extra-philosophical reality, i.e. capitalism and the market. See Cassin 2014.

65 Of course, the point of view on Socrates as philosopher of paradox is not unique; it is quite often in contemporary literature on Classical Antiquity. For example, in his analysis of Plato’s dialogues Jacob Howland similarly argues, “...Socrates suggests that the circularity or impurity of discourse has to do not only with his idiosyncratic way of philosophizing but, more generally, with the paradoxical nature of *logos* itself as it stretches between souls and beings” (Howland 1998, p. 132).

their role in any new and authentic philosophical endeavor.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, the theme of paradox was channeled to the line of logical and mathematical thinking formulated in terms of set theory (such as Bertrand Russell and Kurt Gödel).<sup>67</sup> As their mathematical-logical theorems assert that one cannot represent the totality of all discourses (i.e. a totality of language as such) in a logically coherent meta-language. In this case the paradox becomes not a meta-language representation, but rather an “icon” of this absent totality of language:

“A paradox is an icon of language because it offers a viewpoint over the totality of language. But a paradox is only the icon of language, and not for instance its mimetic image, because the paradox does not reflect an always existing and pre-given linguistic totality. Rather, the paradox is what first allows this totality to take shape.”<sup>68</sup>

Consequently all the history of philosophy can be presented as a history of inventions, of new “shining paradoxes” as well as their exhaustion and eclipse. For example, as Groys emphasizes in his wording of Descartes’ *cogito*, it was invented as a paradox: “only he who doubts everything, including his own existence, knows that he exists.”<sup>69</sup> The powerful evidence of *cogito* is derived from “the force of logic” of a paradox that is hidden in the idea to suspend all possible opinions, rather than from Descartes’ formal logical argument, which is not unproblematic. So the force of *cogito* is bounded to Descartes’ decision to “live in paradox”. Other examples also include Husserl’s *epoché*, as well as manifold and radical paradoxes invented by French and generally by European radical thought after 1968.<sup>70</sup> But for Groys the paradoxes

66 See the assessment of Kierkegaard in *Introduction to Anti-Philosophy*, p. 1-33.

67 In his account Groys does not mention recently discussed “paraconsistent logic” that technically allows contradictions, not stressing any importance of dialectics or paradox per se. See for example Olin 2003.

68 Groys 2009, p. 16. The “icon” is understood in terms of an analogy with theological thinking about the tradition of religious painting, in which the icon is an image without prototype, or the original. See for example the famous essay by theologian Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, U.S., 1996.

69 Groys 2009, p. 34.

70 This perspective on the history of philosophy as history of invention of new paradoxes – again, available only in the brief manifesto form of the ‘Communist Postscript’ – can be put together with Deleuze and Guattari’s views on what they called “concept” in their “What is philosophy?” In outlining the idea of “concept”, they also refer to Russell’s elaboration of sets theory as a response to the problem of specific paradoxes, as well as critiquing the “communication” and “market of opinions”. And more generally, they argue: “If philosophy is paradoxical by nature, this is not because it sides with the least plausible opinion or because it maintains contradictory opinions but rather because it uses sentences of a standard language to express something that does not belong to the order of opinion or even of the proposition” (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p. 80). The difference is rather

invented in the recent European thought have a special status because of an important *displacement* it inaugurates. The radical French philosophy assumed the paradoxes not within Reason or *Logos* – but rather within its “the obscure Other”:

“Paradox arises for these authors as a consequence of language being occupied from the outset by the forces of desire, of the corporeal, of the festival, of the unconscious, of the sacred, of the traumatic – and/or as a consequence of the materiality, the corporeality of language itself; that is to say, paradox arises at the linguistic, rhetorical surfaces of discourse, and not at the more profound hidden levels of its logical structure.”<sup>71</sup>

At the same time, the political consequence of such a displacement was the understanding of capitalist modernity as dominated by the formally coherent “administrative” rationality that doubles the operations of power. The expulsion of the paradoxical from *Logos*, or “discourse,” forces it to move on the side of obscure market and financial logic of the late capitalist modernity. This turns the paradoxical into sheer irrationality, contingency and “elemental” forces. Paradox becomes routinized on a mass-scale political and intellectual practice of well-paid compromises of mainstream neoliberal “centrist politics,” contradictory and opportunistic behaviours masked by the sophistry of argumentation.<sup>72</sup> But, argues Groys, if we accept the idea about the initial paradoxical nature of philosophical discourse and as such reject the assumption about the emancipatory potentiality of the “obscure Other” of this discourse, the diagnosis of modernity as governed by an administrative and formally coherent rationality proves to be something which turns the real conjuncture upside down, i.e. structured as an ideology. There is no substantial change, argues Groys, except for the fact that since Antiquity the sophist, who produces language-as-commodity, and is subordinated to the market, becomes omnipresent and a mass-scale figure, as well as the market becoming a systematic part of the totality of capitalism. And the only way to reclaim language and destroy the power of the market and

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the “anti-Platonist” as well as anti-Hegelian stance of the authors of “What is Philosophy?” and, consequently, their reluctance to define the “concept” in terms of contradiction and its relation to the impossible totality of language. But still, in the familiar move from the “binary logic” of contradiction, they suggest to think of the “concept” as internally multiple and heterogeneous.

71 Ibid, p. 19. In particular, speaking of the “French thought”, Groys names Bataille, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and Derrida.

72 Ultimately, the accumulation of capital can be considered as embracing the paradoxical, but in a non-linguistic and “diabolic” form which permanently raises various conspiracy theories: “But it is capital that should be pre-eminently regarded as diabolical, because capital can profit from A as well as from not-A. If the workers receive higher wages, they can buy more – and profits grow. If the workers receive lower wages, savings can be made on labour power – and profits continue to grow. If there is peace, profits grow thanks to stability. If there is war, profits grow on account of the new demand, and so on” (ibid., p. 24).

capitalism is therefore still to re-instate the “State of Philosophers” with its “force of the logic” as a non-capitalist mode of governing.

Under these conditions, the only opposite model which would reunite a non-instrumental and dialectical Reason and the ‘paradox’, is Soviet power as a philosophical praxis: “Now, Soviet power explicitly defined itself as the rule of dialectical, paradoxical reason – as the answer to the paradoxical character of capital and the commodity as described by Marx.”<sup>73</sup>

Here, finally, enters Stalin: the original epistemological considerations advanced by Groys prepare a leap from philosophers of the Western canon to the dialectical materialism of the Short Course.<sup>74</sup> For instance, according to the author of *Postscript*, the notorious *diamat*’s law of “unity and struggle of the opposites” is not a dogmatic perversion of an “authentic” Marxist-Hegelian dialectics, which – whatever the complexities of its interpretation since the 19<sup>th</sup> century – is still grounded in the interiorization of contradictions, and their *Aufhebung* into a superior entity.<sup>75</sup> In Groys’ view, the law of “unity and struggle of the opposites” is actually a paradoxical formula, which would be closer not to Hegel, but rather, to Kierkegaard who stressed the unsolvable contradiction between the singular and universal in the “paradoxes of belief,” in his reference to the figure of Christ as *both* finite and infinite, without any dialectical mediation. Groys calls Stalin’s *diamat* a “total” logic that is different from formal logic – that excludes the contradiction – and from the dialectics usually understood as an unfolding sublation of contradictions, which “allows paradox to fade away with time.”<sup>76</sup> If “standard” dialectics unfolds the totality via a long process of mediation, the “total logic” presents it in any of its segments, through contradictoriness and paradox, that is, as an “icon” of the totality of discourse. In his further reading of another canonical formula of *diamat*, the fundamental “Being determines Consciousness,” Groys argues that “Being” in this formula is a name for “the (self-) contradictoriness of the

73 Ibid, p. 29.

74 See History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Short Course), chapter 4, part 2 at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/x01>.

75 To be fair to this claim, it is worth to note that the recent works by such theorists as Fredric Jameson (*Valences of the Dialectics*, 2009) and Slavoj Žižek (*Less Than Nothing*, 2012) gesture in a similar direction, constituting much more subtle and complex views on the Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, stressing its non-synthetic and non-identitarian character and the paradoxes of retroactivity, even referring to its “shock” effect likewise Groys describes the mesmerizing “shine of paradox”. See for example Fredric Jameson’s *Valences of the Dialectics* where he discusses “the dialectical shock” (Jameson 2009, p. 51-56).

76 Ibid., p. 43.

world in its totality” which involves the passage of consciousness into “the incessant alternation of thoughts”, with almost infinite speed.<sup>77</sup>

In more specific or “ontic” terms, as Groys shows in his analysis of the Short Course, the most intense zone of contradictions, according to Stalin, lies in the relations between the economic base and cultural and juridical superstructure.<sup>78</sup> But to articulate these contradictions, a specific medium is necessary, which belongs neither to the base nor to the superstructure – hence Stalin’s arrival in his late thought at the meditations on the nature of language. Together with the “philosophical chapter” of the Short Course, for his theory of a paradoxical communism in the USSR, Groys makes a claim for the centrality of Stalin’s “Marxism and Problems of Linguistics.” This intellectual episode, which happened in 1950, was really strange and extraordinary. Stalin never before or after wrote extensively on such an abstract question as language. The discussion took place in “Pravda,” the central newspaper of the USSR, which definitely was not an academic or philosophical journal; millions of Soviet people read the newspaper.<sup>79</sup> The intervention of Stalin therefore was staged in a very dramatic fashion. The discussion started in “Pravda,” initiated by two camps of Soviet linguistics in spring of 1950, and nobody expected a series of articles by comrade Stalin that followed in the summer of the same year with an unmatched “*deus ex machina*” effect, after which one side of the scholarly dispute was of course immediately defeated.

Stalin’s notes on language are the strategic symptom of the Soviet “linguistic turn in practice.” The main question of this work by Stalin is whether language is only a part of the superstructure or a class-based phenomenon – as a group of influential Soviet linguists was arguing – or whether it is immanent to the whole of social totality and has a

77 Ibid, p. 35-36, p. 112.

78 In the Short Course, Stalin – who is assumingly the author or at least a careful editor and curator of the whole anonymous theoretical document – repeats and develops his thoughts from his early-unfinished essay “Socialism or Anarchism” we already discussed in conjuncture with Kojève and the idea of “the end of history”.

79 Until now there is no convincing biographical versions of how Stalin was involved into this discussion. The most prosaic explanation which liberal commentators usually quote is that he was involved into this debate by a linguist of Georgian origin with whom he spent long hours discussing agenda of the linguistic research; the commentators stressed a proximity of two men based on their common cultural background. But again, they fail to notice that – in the same paradoxical logic of “unity of opposites” – the main opponents of Stalin were pupils of charismatic and prolific linguist Nicolas Marr who also was a Georgian by birth. His theory of language stressed that in a given social formation language is divided, split in two parts, according to the line of antagonism between ruling class and subordinated class.

trans-historical nature.<sup>80</sup> Stalin supported the latter point, arguing that language is a necessary part of all society and social production, and that it has a trans-historical and cross-class structure. For Stalin, language is actually a true manifestation of “really existing communism” as it is already classless: “It was created not by some one class, but by the entire society, by all the classes of the society, by the efforts of hundreds of generations.”<sup>81</sup> Being created by all the society, language also serves as a medium of communication for the whole society. For Groys such a statement is precisely what gives proof to the theory of linguistic communism: “...language is capable of entirely replacing the economy, money and capital because it has direct access to all human activities and spheres of life”.<sup>82</sup>

This startling and shocking exegesis of the postulates of Stalin's *diamat*, in its newly discovered closeness to paradoxical thought since Socrates to Kierkegaard and beyond, goes further into the political applications of the paradoxical “total logic” paradigm which, he claims, governed the CCCP. Accordingly, in the political practice of Stalinism all possible “deviations” from the “general line” were repressed, not because they presented a real threat to the regime, but because they were presented as “one-sided,” partial positions, and were not able to follow the “total” logic of holding ‘all positions at once’, in other words, such positions were not paradoxical enough.<sup>83</sup> This way, Stalin's “general line” was a sum of contradictory statements that came from various “oppositional” political camps in the Communist Party, but they were rearranged into a paradoxical discourse. This is why Stalin's “dogmatism” is an effect of various misunderstandings on the part of its critics, including Western intellectuals, who have tried to show it up by using “formal” – i.e. “bourgeois” or “non-dialectical” – logic, for which contradiction is the key criterion for acceptance or refutation of a statement. For *diamat*, in contrast, the contradiction is a “language of life,” the language of a disparate totality of Being. It is the most open method of thinking, which juxtaposes contradictory statements and rejects all particular, closed or one-sided positions.

Finally, as the *Postscript* claims, Stalin also programmed the very

80 Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, New York: International Publishers, 1951. Available at marxists.org <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1950/jun/20.htm>.

81 Ibid.

82 Groys 2009, p. 61.

83 In that sense, Groys notes, Orwell's “war is peace” indeed grasps this logic but it is only its pale imitation.

collapse of USSR, through the logic of *diamat*: the “total” logic included from the very beginning even anti-communist positions; the anti-Soviet dissidence which emerged after Stalin's death is an effect of the gradual dismantling of the paradoxical core of the “really existing” communism. Such positions appropriated autonomy from this core and then were able to restore the dominance of formal coherence, which led to the subversion of the medium of language in principal. But the transition from communism to capitalism in 1990s was still its dialectical completion, because otherwise it would have been one-sided and not paradoxical. Indeed, this completion determines this state as an epochal one, and seals its eventual nature, turning it into an eternal possibility awaiting its next actualization. The dismantling of the USSR was a gesture of sovereignty and force, not an expression of internal weakness, as it cancelled itself by its own paradoxical-dialectical movement –despite what has been said empirically about the defeat in Cold War competition of superpowers, internal corruption of the Party leadership, or the global decrease of prices in the oil market in the 1980s. The USSR was an extra-economic reality based on language and paradox; that is why those factors could not have any impact. Subjectively, the collapse corresponded rather, to a form of “metanoia,” a sudden change of mind, as well as to a dialectical steering of the historical process, and to the communist care about the revolutionary “flame,” not letting it end in boredom and stagnation. Of course, at this point one can admit an inaudible “philosophical laughter” – a laughter addressed to all the mediocre liberal mainstream interpretations of the downfall of the Soviet project produced in the camp of its former foes. This laughter gets more intense when Groys starts to speculate that the dialectical programme of self-dissolution was already embedded in Stalin's Constitution, in the famous article on the nations right for self-determination which was used by former Soviet republics in 1991. As Groys stresses, pointing to an idea of a “paradoxical” State,

“The reason for this could only be that Stalin wanted to define the Soviet Union dialectically – as at once state and non-state”.<sup>84</sup>

According to Groys' hypothesis, the “real” in “really existing communism” was not the historiographical reality of its vicissitudes and atrocities, but the short eventual moment of “linguistification” of society, and the rule of a philosophical paradox, the radical ontological experiment with all its implied risks and sufferings. Here, Groys reaches a crypto-theological modality of his account, elaborating about the pains of realisation of the idea of communism – the “martyrdom to the *logos* become flesh – which in this case is the Communist Party and the Soviet

84 Ibid, p. 119.

people.”<sup>85</sup>

The last move that completes the paradoxical hypothesis of communism is an explanation of *why* it was overlooked by several generations of theorists, which were relentlessly discussing the phenomena of Stalin and the nature of the USSR. The “bourgeois” philosophers, and even Western Marxist theorists, who were not trained in the mastery of paradox, could not imagine what how powerful and fundamental was the Event of the agonizing communist *logos* that unfolded within the USSR’s borders. They understood the USSR rather, as a kingdom of simplified rationalist utopia, turned into the dominant power of a Party elite and bureaucracy that completely got rid off any charm of paradoxical thinking. At the level of capitalist mass culture, the key leitmotif of presenting “really existing communism” was, rather, in the form of a humanist ideology, which emphasized the moment of human desires and needs suppressed by the soulless machinery of the State.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, according to the author of the *Postscript*, the strategic error of contemporary critical thought is its cancellation of any ambition to claim power as “totalitarian” and anti-democratic. In reality it means that this cancellation turns into the contemporary dispersed influence of mediatised “masterminds,” endorsed by the “market of ideas” which transforms any critique into a commodity. The Western left intellectuals were usually referred to as the “bourgeois Left” in the Soviet discourse: that is, they failed to recognize the event of ‘paradoxical linguistic communism’ in the USSR, and their critique of the Soviet experiment, as Groys claims, became a model for the critique of their own capitalist societies that those theorists inhabited, not without some bourgeois comfort.<sup>87</sup> In the end, the “bourgeois Left” became hostage to the cultural and institutional logic of late capitalism, that captures critical projects within its precarious financial base stopped, without much ceremony, due to financial limitations and cuts.

V.

After the analysis and commentary of the *Postscript*, as well as some aspects of Kojève’s views on Stalin and the “end of history,” (both

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85  
Ibid., p. 73.

86 This motif reintroduced familiar elements of classic dystopias from Moore, Campanella and Fourier to Zamyatin and Orwell and then became a mainstream in mass propaganda in time of Cold War.

87 Such as Orwell’s figure of “Big Brother” which was invented for the critique of the “totalitarian” USSR and now refers to phenomena of control and surveillance within the western societies themselves. Groys 2009, p. 84.

works of impressive intellectual ambition and considerable paradox), it is worth asking a series of questions: to whom can those performances be addressed now? What important elements can we borrow from these arguments for contemporary “ideological struggles”? What tendencies – reactionary or progressive – do they support? In response to these questions I would like to offer several brief concluding notes.

This set of paradoxes is definitely a provocation for mainstream liberals for whom the name “Stalin” is forever and exclusively bounded to “totalitarianism,” the Gulag and recently *The Black Book of Communism*. In the *Postscript* there is no mention of these social and historical narratives or proper names, which are usually present in assessments of the Soviet past, and expressed with specific emotional tonalities. The enormous hiatus is symptomatic. The *Postscript* is situated in a space “beyond Stalin” in the sense of detachment from this conventional discourse and any words about the Gulag would sound as absurd as, for example, as a monograph about Jean Racine which would privilege an assessment of the literary works by the French writer based on the hypothesis that he was criminally involved in the famous Poisoning Affair.

In a different way, Slavoj Žižek has already challenged critical the problem of Stalin at many points in his writings. For instance, in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2002) Žižek endeavoured to unpack the ideological and political underpinnings of the notion introduced by Hannah Arendt and popularized in the Cold War era.<sup>88</sup> Žižek relates this notion to *Denkverbot*, i.e. prohibition to think about the problem in any other terms. This prohibition blocks any attempt to think about a radical alternative to the existing capitalist order, through a sort of blackmail: “... they know there is corruption, exploitation, and so on, but every attempt to change things is denounced as ethically dangerous and unacceptable, resuscitating the ghost of ‘totalitarianism.’”<sup>89</sup> In his further argument this “obvious” choice between a “lesser” and “bigger” evil, which in fact legitimises the contemporary capitalist status quo, undergoes a radical critique. While Žižek’s interpretation hardly acknowledges any valences of Stalin’s thought *per se*, rather *explaining* the effects of Stalinism with an advanced apparatus of Lacanian-Marxist theory, Groys’ account seems to be more extreme in this respect, scandalously inserting the brutal Soviet leader into a tradition of paradoxical thinking, including such respected

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88 Žižek 2002, p. 12.

89 Ibid., p. 4. Referring to Alain Badiou’s point he made in “Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism”, Žižek notes that “...despite its horrors and failures, ‘actually existing Socialism’ was the only political force that - for some decades, at least - seemed to pose an *effective* threat to the global rule of capitalism, really scaring its representatives, driving them into paranoiac reaction.” (p. 130).

and foundational philosophical figures as Socrates and Kierkegaard.<sup>90</sup> This comparison may indicate the historically shaped alternative which was never really challenged – the old “Western” and “Eastern” Marxist divide: the first associated with unconditional creative potential and ruthless criticality, and the latter associated with a flattened and dogmatic style of argument that can be only *explained*, not thought through. In his interpretative performance, Groys attempts to overturn completely this opposition, facilitating the rediscovery of many important philosophical contributions of Soviet Marxism.

At the same time, Groys (as well as Kojève) virtually occupies the position of the *Subject* of “true” Stalinist discourse and violently attack the “bourgeois” Left, in the decadent sophistication of their impotent anti-capitalist critique, which makes their position objectively cynical and hypocritical, independent from any level of personal engagement and honesty. But his actual position is de facto subsumed by the same market logic and its neutralising effect. Even if we accept Groys’ definition, after the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, all the Left becomes “bourgeois” insofar as they exist in conditions where any verbal critical claim is supposed to be subordinated to other medium. The invectives addressed to the contemporary Left made from the position of “real communism” – once backed by real political and economic powers of the USSR which is non-existent anymore – can be helpful only to various sorts of cynical beneficiaries of this collapse. This provocation, if taken seriously, produces a dilemma exactly in Kierkegaard’s style of “either / or” – either endless and powerless critique of capitalism which is permanently co-opted and re-functioned, or communism, understood only as “really existing” communism – an Event which has temporal and territorial borders, a “project” which can be “closed” at any moment, being a sort of a local anomalous emergence. But how effective can such a position be? Structurally, it looks like the same imposed choice between the “lesser” and “bigger” evil. You can take risks undertaking a progressive move, accepting all potential atrocities created by experimenting with a “real communism” again, or maybe you can just resign oneself to the existing order, which may look just a little bit worse than the legacy of “real communism” in Groys’ interpretation. This interpretation endows the Soviet experience with an almost absolute, self-contained, self-referential constitution and meaning. The contingent and paradoxical abandonment of the Soviet project of “real communism” – if we accept for a moment this hypothesis – leaves us with no substantial orientations. We are just told that the ‘paradoxical possibility’ of communism may occur in some future conducive environment. Such an

90 Definitely, Žižek’s analysis of Stalinism, starting from his article “When the Party commits suicide” in *New Left Review* and then scattered in his many books and publications, to be systematically summarized, deserves a separate research.

encapsulation of the Soviet experience in a figure of a passive and blind destiny opens a path to its sacralisation, the logic of which is already prefigured in Groys’ reference to the “martyrs” of the paradoxical Logos, and the theological “kenosis” of its incarnation, as well as his reference to a paradoxical “metanoia,” which is a term for religious conversion as well. It is no coincidence that in the Old Testament the word *παράδοξον* means a “miracle” or “wonder” and in New Testament “paradoxes” lead believers to ecstasy and glorification of God, as well as fill their souls with fear.<sup>91</sup> At some points Groys’ position seems to be the position of a *theologian* of Soviet communism, but a highly paradoxical theologian of Tertullian type with his “*credo quia absurdum*” – actually, quoted in the *Postscript*.<sup>92</sup>

There is an interesting analogy between the model of “real communism” as a “linguistic turn,” when language becomes the only medium of the society, in the idea of a “post-Fordist” capitalism in contemporary Italian thought (Toni Negri, Paolo Virno et al). The main point is that under post-Fordist capitalism, “immaterial” or “communicative” labour becomes the hegemonic form of production of value. Each worker is de facto a thinker, “a philosopher” and a productive force in the “general intellect” of which Marx spoke in *Grundrisse*. According to a paradoxical terminology coined by Virno, this late capitalist conjuncture can be even called a “communism of capital.”<sup>93</sup> In this case, Groys’ argument may seem a symptomatic projection of the perverseness of “communism of capital” in the “heart of darkness” of Stalin’s regime. In a related interview, Groys rejects this parallel arguing that post-Operaismo misunderstands the materiality of language and media in contemporary capitalism.<sup>94</sup> More precisely, the claim that a linguistic production becomes the main productive force of capitalism, only reiterates the axiom that in these conditions language is subordinated to the medium of “money.” But still, this does not allow structurally any further thinking outside of the trap of the alternative between the communist use of language under the auspices of a centralised State (or “non-State”) which guards a space for such use,

91 Das Paradox. Eine Herausforderung des abendländischen Denkens / Ed. Geyer P., Hagenbüchle R. Tübingen, 1992.

92 Of course, this sentence does not mean willingness to believe in any stupid absurdity because it is absurdity, “...he [Tertullian] means that only the absurdity of Christianity corresponds to the logical criteria of complete absurdity, that is, of complete paradoxicality, and on this basis Christianity alone meets the requirements of serving as the icon of the whole” (p. 47).

93 Virno 2004.

94 See Groys 2007

or the immersion of language into the medium of “money” and market.<sup>95</sup> It seems that in Groys’ account, communism and capitalism are two equivalent responses to the internal contradictions of modernity, and neither capitalism nor communism has, in fact, any privilege in terms of its historical succession, or higher ontological status, or value for humanity. If there is no longer any residual idea of a “better” future here, this looks indeed like a strange and fatalistic nihilism – well, we have capitalism now, it is a bad thing; but with another radical crisis, with war and revolution soon again, capitalism can be replaced by communism, then swapped again; and this will be until the end of the world.

But the centrality of a State in the hypothesis of the linguistic and paradoxical communism as well as in the communism of “the end of history,” with all its implicit traps, indicates perhaps a way of exiting these traps. The idea of a communist State, supported both by Kojève and Groys, remains important for the contemporary debate. The enigmatic “universal and homogeneous State” of Kojève, or the fabulous “Kingdom of Philosophers” in Groys, both refer to a strange “State without a State.”<sup>96</sup> This is definitely not a “classic” Marxist view of the idea of communism, which departs from the scattered fragments and notes on communism in Marx, mostly considered there as a self-organisation of society, or “free association” of the working class without any mediation

95 In another recent interview Groys says exactly this: “In the West, this kind of administration—in these societies beyond consensus—occurs through the market. But in the East, the market was ultimately abolished by the Bolsheviks. And so instead of being governed by economics, there was an emergence of certain kinds of administrative power practicing a language beyond consensus. [...] When the class struggle asserts itself the possibility of reaching consensus or a common truth disappears. How does society manage that? There are two models: the state and the market. They manage the problem in two different ways” (“Remembrance of things past. An interview with Boris Groys”, Platypus, Issue 54, March 2013, p. 4).

96 The image of a strange “kingdom”, or a monarchy in relation to the USSR was firstly evoked by another heterodox exegete of Stalin and usual suspect of being a Stalinist, Bertolt Brecht. According to the witness of his friend Walter Benjamin, who documented his conversations with Brecht while they both were in exile in Denmark, spending time together almost each day during July-August 1934, Brecht mentioned a strange political monster, a “workers monarchy”. According to Benjamin, Brecht was saying, ‘In Russia there is dictatorship over the proletariat. We should avoid dissociating ourselves from this dictatorship for as long as it still does useful work for the proletariat – i.e. so long as it contributes towards an agreement between the proletariat and the peasantry, with predominant recognition of proletarian interests.’ As comments Benjamin, “A few days later Brecht spoke of a ‘workers’ monarchy’, and I compared this organism with certain grotesque sports of nature dredged up from the depths of the sea in the form of homed fish or other monsters” (Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, London, Verso, 1998, p. 121). Another intersection of Brecht’s thinking with the Kojève-Groys hypothesis was his interest in ancient figures of the Sage that he quotes in his poems, as well as in his book “Me-ti” written during his exile in 1930s. The book is shaped as a biographic narrative of a Chinese sage who would be contemporary to another sage, Socrates; its fragments and anecdotes allude to the situation of 1930s, the Moscow trials as well as to the problems of dialectical method; Hegel, Marx, Luxemburg, Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky introduced as other “Sages” under pseudo-Chinese names. Probably, the whole Brecht’s idea of “epic theatre” and the “estrangement effect” that makes protagonists be “aware” or “conscious” of their social positions can be compared to Kojève’s analysis of “proletarian awareness” as the post-historical paradigm of the USSR.

or intervention of the State. Lenin in his *State and Revolution* famously says that the transition to communism, indeed, implies the *abolishing* of the (bourgeois) State, but a further process is covered over by different terms which are the *withering away* of the State, or even “more graphic and colourful”, as Lenin says, its “*falling asleep*” (as in the Russian original) which could mean its preservation in a strange narcoleptic but efficient condition.<sup>97</sup> Since early modern political philosophy, the standard narrative says that the State emerges out of a virtual “state of Nature.” But, as “bourgeois ideologists,” these theorists ignored the fact that the exit from the “state of nature” was incomplete; its currently growing “grey zones” are capitalist wars, the omnipresent “anarchy of the market” and a permanent “state of exception.” And perhaps, in these terms, the theorists of communism were thinking about a final exit from this hidden, internal “state of nature,” which is camouflaged by the shaky and repressive edifice of the “really existing” capitalist State. So the communist radical alteration is probably not to be considered as a dialectic return to the “State of nature” but, paradoxically, as its *real overcoming* in the process of establishing a new State, or maybe, to use one of the formulas quoted here, “both state and non-state.” The contours of this strange and potential State (even without a capital S) can emerge only from the philosophical and political work on the reality and experiences of “really existed” communism.

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97 See my discussion of this idea of the “falling asleep” of the State in my contribution to the book “No More Sleep” (Archive Books, Berlin, 2015).

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