# Varieties of the Transcendental in Western Marxism[*]

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In the last decades, the distrust of Western Marxism is growing among the few remaining radical Leftist theorists, from Perry Anderson and Wolfgang Fritz Haug to Domenico Losurdo whose main reproach is that Western Marxism lost contact with the Third World revolutionary movements. (Losurdo, who wrote a book rehabilitating Stalin, also considers Deng Xiaoping's reforms an example of authentic Marxist politics.) From the Western Marxist standpoint, it is, of course, the Third World Communist radicalism which lost contact with the authentic emancipatory content of Marxism. It is interesting to note that Western Marxism (rebaptized "Cultural Marxism") is also the target of the ongoing counterattack of the alt-right against political correctness: the alt-right interprets the rise of Western Marxism as the result of a deliberate shift in Marxist (or Communist) strategy. After Communism lost the economic battle with liberal capitalism (waiting in vain for the revolution to arrive in the developed Western world), its leaders decided to move the terrain to cultural struggles (sexuality, feminism, racism, religion, etc.), systematically undermining the cultural foundations and values of our freedoms. In recent decades, this new approach proved unexpectedly efficient: today, our societies are caught in the self-destructive circle of guilt, unable to defend

their positive legacy. This attack from both extremes proves the continuing actuality of Western Marxism—obviously, it touches a sensitive nerve in both sides of our political spectrum. The irony is that, for those who see today's China as the Socialist alternative to global capitalism, Western Marxism remains all too "Eurocentric," while for the alt-right defenders of the Western Christian tradition, Western Marxism is the most dangerous weapon in the ongoing undermining of the Western tradition. So, what makes Western Marxism such a unique phenomenon? In philosophical terms, the novelty of Western Marxism resides in its rehabilitation of the transcendental dimension—perhaps the most appropriate characterization of Western Marxism would be "transcendental Marxism," with the totality of social practice playing the role of the unsurpassable transcendental horizon of our cognition.

Western Marxism began with two seminal works, Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács 1972 [1923]) and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (Korsch 2013 [1923]). It was at its inception a Hegelian reaction to the progressive neo-Kantianism which was (more or less) the official philosophy of the reformist Second International social democracy. Neo-Kantians insisted on the gap between objective social reality and the normative realm of autonomous ethical goals which cannot be deduced from reality (they reject this option as a case of illegitimate determinism which reduces the Ought to the positive order of Being); this is why they referred to their political stance as that of "Ethical socialism." Lukács (as well as Korsch) dismissed neo-Kantian dualism, demanding a unity of theory and practice, of the positive order of Being and ethical tasks; for Lukács, revolutionary theory is in itself a form of practice, it doesn't just reflect reality but functions as an immanent moment of social totality. Historical materialism is not an objective theory of social life which has to be supplemented by Marxist ideology destined to mobilize masses on the basis of Marxist scientific insights: Marxist knowledge of history is in itself practical, it changes its object (the working class) into a revolutionary subject.

As such, historical materialism is not "impartial": truth about our society is available only from an engaged "partial" position.

However, although revolutionary Marxism aims at overcoming all metaphysical dualities, its history is traversed by the gap between realism and transcendentalism: while the Soviet version of dialectical materialism proposes a new version of naïve-realist ontology (a vision of all of reality with human history as its special region, a topic of historical materialism), Western Marxism proposes the collective human praxis as the ultimate transcendental horizon of our philosophical understanding; as Lukács put it, nature itself is a social category, i.e., our notion of nature is always (over)determined by the social totality in which we dwell. Lukács is, of course, not claiming that, at the ontic level of reality, social subjectivity causally produces nature. What he claims is that, although humanity emerged out of nature's self-development, our notion of and approach to nature is always mediated through the social totality. In the eighteenth century, nature appeared as a well-ordered, hierarchic system clearly mirroring the absolutist monarchy (such a notion of nature was deployed by Carl Linné); in the nineteenth century, nature appeared as the vast field of evolution permeated by the struggle for survival along the lines of wild market capitalism (Darwin himself took his idea of struggle for survival from Malthus); in our information era, nature appears as a vast network of information exchange and gene reproduction; and so forth. Lukács's point would have been simply that one cannot abstract from this social mediation and approach nature as it "really is in itself," independently of this mediation. The gap that separates the ontic view of reality from the transcendental role of social praxis is thus unbridgeable, i.e., one cannot account for the rise of social praxis in ontic terms of reality.

From this standpoint, any form of the subject-object relationship which refuses to admit the prospect of their full mediation is denounced as reified ideology: labor (in the sense of the instrumental exploitation of objective laws of nature; in labor, I use tools to manipulate natural objects to fit my purposes external

to their existence) is "reified" since it maintains towards reality the position of external manipulation and thereby treats it as the independent domain of objects; the natural sciences are also "reified" since they perceive themselves as the knowledge of reality the way it is in itself, outside its mediation through subjectivity.

The political implications of this radical Fichtian-Hegelian position of the proletariat as the subject-object of history were no less radical: until the late 1920s, Lukács considered himself the philosopher of Leninism who organized Lenin's pragmatic revolutionary practices into the formal philosophy of the vanguard-party revolution (inclusive of advocating Red Terror); no wonder his next book after *History and Class Consciousness* was a study on Lenin. The leftist implications of Lukács's position can be clearly discerned in his polemics against those who, after the defeat of Béla Kun's revolutionary government in Hungary, blamed unfavorable objective circumstances. Lukács's reply is that one cannot directly refer to objective social circumstances since such circumstances are themselves conditioned by the failure of the subjective engagement of revolutionary forces. In short, every objective state of things is already mediated by subjectivity, even if this mediation remains negative, i.e., even if it amounts to the mere lack of subjective engagement.

So, what happened in the late 1920s? Did Lukács simply surrender to the reality of Stalinism which dominated within the Communist movement? Although, from the 1930s onwards, he paid lip service to official Stalinist orthodoxy (without ever really engaging himself in Stalinist dialectical materialism—he was all too well acquainted with Hegel to do that), there is a mysterious and often overlooked intermediate stage. In 1928, after the revolutionary wave of the early 1920s subsided, Lukács published his so-called "Blum Theses" (Lukács 2014) in which he called for a strategy similar to the Popular Fronts that arose in the 1930s: the broad coalition of all democratic anti-fascist forces to combat the authoritarian trends that emerged all around Europe. The irony is that he did this too early, before the Popular Front became the

official Communist policy, so his theses were rejected and Lukács withdrew into literary theory.

At the philosophical level, Lukács's abandonment of the position advocated in *History and Class Consciousness* was also not a simple regression. The ignored obverse of his accommodation to Marxist orthodoxy (he no longer conceived the social practice of collective historical subjectivity as the ultimate horizon of thinking, instead endorsing a general ontology with humanity as its part) is the acceptance of the tragic dimension of the revolutionary subject (see Lukács 1968). Lukács refers to Marx's notion that the heroic period of the French Revolution was the necessary enthusiastic breakthrough followed by the unheroic phase of market relations: the true social function of the revolution was to establish the condition for the prosaic reign of bourgeois economy, and the true heroism resides not in blindly clinging to the early revolutionary enthusiasm but in recognizing "the rose in the cross of the present," as Hegel liked to paraphrase Luther (Hegel 1991, p. 22), i.e., in abandoning the position of the "beautiful soul" and fully accepting the present as the only possible domain of actual freedom. It is thus this "compromise" with social reality which enabled Hegel's crucial philosophical step forward, that of overcoming the proto-fascist notion of "organic" community in his *System der Sittlichkeit* manuscript and engaging in the dialectical analysis of the antagonisms of bourgeois civil society. It is obvious that Lukács's analysis is deeply allegorical: it was written a couple of months after Trotsky launched his thesis about Stalinism as the Thermidor of the October Revolution. Lukács's text has thus to be read as a reply to Trotsky: he accepts Trotsky's characterization of Stalin's regime as "Thermidorian," while giving it a positive twist; instead of bemoaning the loss of utopian energy, one should, in a heroically resigned way, accept its consequences as the only actual space of social progress. For Marx, of course, the sobering "day after" which follows the revolutionary intoxication signals the original limitation of the "bourgeois" revolutionary project, the

falsity of its promise of universal freedom: the "truth" of universal human rights is the rights of commerce and private property. If we read Lukács's endorsement of the Stalinist Thermidor, it implies (arguably against his conscious intention) a pessimist perspective difficult to reconcile with Marxism: the proletarian revolution itself is also characterized by the gap between its illusory universal assertion of freedom and the ensuing awakening in the new relations of domination and exploitation, which means that the communist project of realizing "actual freedom" necessarily fails in its first attempt and that it can be salvaged only through its repetition. But what if, looking back at the twentieth century from our present vantage point, one should precisely maintain this pessimist turn of Lukács's?

Lukács himself later softened this "pessimist" edge and, in his own version of the humanist Marxist revival in the 1960s, dedicated the last decade of his life to the elaboration of a new "ontology of social being" (see Lukács 1978–1980). This late ontology of Lukács's is totally out of sync with the revival of Marxist praxis-philosophy in the 1960s: the latter remains within the transcendental space (its central notion of praxis is the unsurpassable horizon which cannot be grounded in any general ontology), while Lukács aims at deploying social ontology as a special sphere of general ontology. The central notion of his attempt is the notion of human labor as the elementary form of teleology: in human labor, nature overcomes itself, its determinism, since natural processes become moments of the process of material realization of human goals. Against Aristotelian or Hegelian idealism which subordinates the totality of nature to a spiritual telos, as a materialist Lukács sees social labor as the primary domain of teleology, a domain which remains a small part of nature and arises spontaneously out of biological processes. The supreme irony here is that, in his social ontology of labor, Lukács refers to the young Marx, to his so-called *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (first published in the early

1930s) which were the holy text of humanist Marxism. While humanist Marxists read them in a transcendental way, focusing on the notion of alienation, Lukács uses these manuscripts to justify the abandonment of the big Hegelian motif of *History and Class Consciousness*, the total mediation of subject and object in the proletariat as the subject-object of history. According to his later self-criticism, this Hegelian speculative identity of subject and object ignores the difference between objectivization (of the subject in labor) and reification (in conditions of alienation): for the young Lukács, every objectivization is reification, while he now concedes that in objectivizing its essential powers in objects which express its creativity, there is no necessary reification at work—reification occurs only when labor is exercised in social conditions of alienation. In short, for the young Lukács, labor (as the activity of realizing goals in reality by changing the shape of material objects) is as such alienated, and we overcome alienation only through the total mediation of subject and object.

Although this "ontology of social labor" cannot be reduced to a version of Stalinist dialectical materialism, it remains but one in the series of big evolutionary visions of the cosmos as the ontological hierarchy of levels (matter, plants, animal life, and human spirit as the highest level known to us), thus coming all too close to Nicolai Hartmann's ontology (and Lukács does refer positively to Hartmann). (It is interesting to note that even Quentin Meillassoux falls into this trap and pays a fateful price for his suspension of the transcendental dimension, i.e., the price of the regression to a naïve-realist ontology of spheres or levels in the style of Hartmann: material reality, life, thought.) Such naïve realism is basically premodern, it signals a return to Renaissance thought that precedes the birth of modern science.

Other Western Marxists tried to break out of the transcendental circle without regressing to realist ontology; if we leave aside Walter Benjamin who deserves special treatment, we should mention at least Ernst Bloch who deployed a gigantic edifice of an

unfinished universe tending towards the utopian point of absolute perfection. In his masterpiece *The Principle of Hope*, he provides an encyclopedic account of mankind's and nature's orientation towards a socially and technologically improved future (see Bloch 1995). Bloch considered Marx's comments about "humanization of nature" (again, from his early *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*) of key importance: a true radical utopia should embrace the entire universe, nature included, i.e., utopias that are limited to the organization of society and ignore nature are no better than abstractions. In contrast to late Lukács, Bloch thus proposes a full future-oriented cosmology, inscribing teleology into nature itself (in contrast to our emphasis on unorientables). He thereby overcomes the transcendental circle, but the price is too high—a return to premodern utopian cosmology.

The radical counterpart to Bloch's progressive cosmology was provided by Evald Ilyenkov in his early manuscript on the "cosmology of the spirit."[1] Provocatively relying on what is for Western Marxists the ultimate *bête noire* (Friedrich Engels's manuscripts posthumously gathered in *Dialectics of Nature*, as well as the Soviet tradition of dialectical materialism), and combining these references with contemporary cosmology, Ilyenkov brings the dialectical-materialist idea of the gradual progressive development of reality from elementary forms of matter through different forms of life to (human) thought to its logical Nietzschean conclusion. If reality is (spatially and temporally) without limits, then there is overall, with regard to its totality, no progress, everything that could happen always-already happened: although full of dynamics in its parts, the universe as a Whole is a Spinozean stable substance. What this means is that, in contrast to Bloch, every development is circular, every movement upwards has to

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[1] See Penzin 2018. All quotes from Ilyenkov as well as from Penzin are from this source. Ilyenkov's "Cosmology of the Spirit" was written in the early 1950s and first published in Russian in 1988 (see Ilyenkov 2017).

be accompanied by a movement downwards, every progress by a regress: movement is "a cyclical movement from the lowest forms of matter to the highest ('the thinking brain') *and back*, to their decomposition into the lowest forms of matter (biological, chemical, and physical)" (Penzin 2018). Ilyenkov supplements this vision of the universe by two further hypotheses. First, the movement in the cosmos is limited downwards and upwards, it takes place between the lowest level (chaotic matter) and the highest level (thought), with there being nothing imaginably higher than thought. Second, thought is not just a contingent local occurrence in the development of matter but possesses a reality and an efficiency of its own, it is a necessary part (a culmination) of the entire development of reality. And now comes Ilyenkov's most daring cosmological speculation: "this cyclical development of the universe passes through a phase involving the complete destruction of matter—through a galaxy-scale 'fire'." (Ibid.) This passage through the zero-level which relaunches cosmic development does not happen by itself, it

> needs a special *intervention* to rechannel the energy that was radiated during the cycle of matter's development into a new "global fire." The question of what (or who) sets the universe on fire is crucial. According to Ilyenkov, it is the cosmological function of thought to provide the conditions to "relaunch" the universe, which is collapsing due to thermal death. It is human intelligence which, having achieved the highest potency, has to launch the big bang. This is how thought proves *in reality* that it is a necessary attribute of matter. (Penzin 2018)

To make this key speculative moment clearer, let's quote a passage from Ilyenkov's own text:

> In concrete terms, one can imagine it like this: At some peak point of their development, thinking beings, executing their cosmological duty and sacrificing themselves, produce a conscious cosmic

catastrophe—provoking a process, a reverse "thermal dying" of cosmic matter; that is, provoking a process leading to the rebirth of dying worlds by means of a cosmic cloud of incandescent gas and vapors. // In simple terms, thought turns out to be a necessary mediating link, thanks only to which the fiery "rejuvenation" of universal matter becomes possible; it proves to be this direct "efficient cause" that leads to the instant activation of endless reserves of interconnected motion [...]. (Ilyenkov 2017, pp. 185–86)

Now comes Ilyenkov's craziest ethico-political speculation regarding the (not only social but) cosmological necessity and role of communism: for Ilyenkov, such a radical self-sacrifice can be performed only by a highly developed communist society:

Millions of years will pass, thousands of generations will be born and go to their graves, a genuine human system will be established on Earth, with the conditions for activity—a classless society, spiritual and material culture will abundantly blossom, with the aid of, and on the basis of, which humankind can only fulfill its great sacrificial duty before nature. // For us, for people living at the dawn of human prosperity, the struggle for this future will remain the only real form of service to the highest aims of the thinking spirit. (Ilyenkov 2017, pp. 189–90)

So the ultimate justification of communism is that, by way of bringing about a solidary society free of egotist instincts, it will have enough ethical strength to perform the highest self-sacrifice of not only humanity's self-destruction but of the simultaneous destruction of the entire cosmos: "*if* humanity is unable to achieve communism, then collective human intelligence will not achieve its highest stage of power either, as it will be undermined by the capitalist system, which is as far as one can get from any self-sacrificial or otherwise sublime motivation." (Penzin 2018)

Ilyenkov was well aware of the speculative nature of this cosmology (he referred to it as his "phantasmagoria" or "dream"), so no wonder that it was later interpreted in a rude historicist or

even personal way: as a cosmic extrapolation of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, or even as a foretelling of Ilyenkov's suicide in 1979. At a more immanent theoretical level, the suspicion immediately arises here that Ilyenkov's cosmology "expresses archaic, premodern contents wrapped in the language of classic philosophy, science, and dialectical materialism. The indicator of this mythic content is, especially, the theme of heroic self-sacrifice and 'global fire'" (ibid.). Along these lines, Boris Groys interprets Ilyenkov's cosmology as a return to paganism, discerning in it "'a revival of the Aztec religion' of Quetzalcoatl, who 'sets himself on fire to reverse the entropic process'" (ibid.). While this is in principle true, one should not forget that once we are in modernity, i.e., after Descartes's and Kant's breakthroughs, a direct return to pagan cosmology is not possible: every such return has to be interpreted as a symptom of thought's inability to confront the radical negativity at work in the very core of modern subjectivity.[2] The same holds already for the first systematic deployment of the idea of total destruction in the long philosophical dissertation delivered to Juliette by Pope Pius VI, part of book 5 of de Sade's *Juliette*. As Aaron Schuster writes:

> there is nothing wrong with rape, torture, murder, and so on, since these conform to the violence that is the universal law of things. To act in accordance with Nature means to actively take part in its orgy of destruction. The trouble is that man's capacity for crime is highly limited, and his atrocities, no matter how debauched, ultimately outrage nothing. This is a depressing thought for the libertine. The human being, along with all organic life and even inorganic matter, is caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth, generation and corruption, so that "there is indeed no real death," only a permanent transformation and recycling of matter according to the immanent laws of "the three kingdoms," animal, vegetable,

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[2] In what follows, I resume the line of thought from the last chapter of my *Disparities* (Žižek 2016).

and mineral. Destruction may accelerate this process, but it cannot stop it. The true crime would be the one that no longer operates within the three kingdoms but annihilates them altogether, that puts a stop to the eternal cycle of generation and corruption and, by doing so, returns to Nature her absolute privilege of contingent creation, of casting the dice anew. (Schuster 2016, pp. 39–40; de Sade 1968, p. 966)

What, then, at a strict theoretical level, is wrong with this dream of the "second death" as a radical pure negation which puts a stop to the life-cycle itself? In a superb display of his genius, Lacan provides a simple answer: "It is just that, being a psychoanalyst, I can see that the second death is prior to the first, and not after, as de Sade dreams it" (Lacan 2007, p. 67). (The only problematic part of this statement is the qualification "being a psychoanalyst"—a Hegelian philosopher can also see this quite clearly.) In what precise sense are we to understand this priority of the second death—the radical annihilation of the entire life-cycle of generation and corruption—over the first death which remains a moment of this cycle? Schuster points the way: "Sade believes that there exists a well-established second nature that operates according to immanent laws. Against this ontologically consistent realm he can only dream of an absolute Crime that would abolish the three kingdoms and attain the pure disorder of primary nature" (Schuster 2016, pp. 40–41). In short, what de Sade doesn't see is that there is no big Other, no Nature as an ontologically consistent realm—nature is already in itself inconsistent, unbalanced, destabilized by antagonisms. The total negation imagined by de Sade thus doesn't come at the end, as a threat or prospect of radical destruction, it comes at the beginning, it has always-already happened, it stands for the zero-level starting point out of which the fragile/inconsistent reality emerges. In other words, what is missing in the notion of Nature as a body regulated by fixed laws is simply the *subject itself*: in Hegelese, the Sadeian Nature remains a Substance, de Sade continues to grasp reality

only as Substance and not also as Subject, where "subject" does not stand for another ontological level different from Substance but for the immanent incompleteness-inconsistency-antagonism of Substance itself. And, insofar as the Freudian name for this radical negativity is the death drive, Schuster is right to point out how, paradoxically, what de Sade misses in his celebration of the ultimate crime of radical destruction of all life is precisely the death drive:

> for all its wantonness and havoc the Sadeian will-to-extinction is premised on a fetishistic denial of the death drive. The sadist makes himself into the servant of universal extinction precisely in order to avoid the deadlock of subjectivity, the "virtual extinction" that splits the life of the subject from within. The Sadeian libertine expels this negativity outside himself in order to be able to slavishly devote himself to it; the apocalyptic vision of an absolute Crime thus functions as a screen against a more intractable internal split. What the diabolical reason of the sadist masks is the fact that the Other is barred, inconsistent, lacking, that it cannot be served, for it presents no law to obey, not even the wild law of its accelerating autodestruction. There is no nature to be followed, rivaled or outdone, and it is this void or lack, the nonexistence of the Other, that is incomparably more violent than even the most destructive fantasm of the death drive. Or, as Lacan argues, Sade is right if we just turn around his evil thought: subjectivity *is* the catastrophe it fantasizes about, the death beyond death, the "second death." While the sadist dreams of violently forcing a cataclysm that will wipe the slate clean, what he does not want to know is that this unprecedented calamity has already taken place. Every subject is the end of the world, or rather, this impossibly explosive end that is equally a "fresh start," the unabolishable chance of the dice throw. (Schuster 2016, pp. 41–42)

Kant had already characterized a free autonomous act as an act which cannot be accounted for in terms of natural causality, of the texture of causes and effects: a free act occurs as its own cause, it opens up a new causal chain from its zero-point. So insofar as

the "second death" is the interruption of the natural life-cycle of generation and corruption, no radical annihilation of the entire natural order is needed for this—an autonomous free act already suspends natural causality, and the subject as $ already is this cut in the natural circuit, the self-sabotage of natural goals. The mystical name for this end of the world is "night of the world," and its philosophical name is radical negativity as the core of subjectivity. And, to quote Mallarmé, a throw of the dice will never abolish chance, i.e., the abyss of negativity remains forever the unsublatable background of subjective creativity. We may even risk here an ironic version of Gandhi's famous motto "be yourself the change you want to see in the world": the subject is itself the catastrophe it fears and tries to avoid.

Back to Ilyenkov. Exactly the same holds for his notion of the radical self-destruction of reality: although clearly a phantasmagoria, it shouldn't be taken lightly, for it is a symptom of the fatal flaw of the entire project of Western Marxism. Constrained by the transcendental role of social practice as the ultimate horizon of our experience, Western Marxism cannot adequately take into account radical negativity as the crack in the Real which renders possible the rise of subjectivity; this neglected dimension, foreclosed by transcendental thought, then returns in the real as the phantasmagoria of a total world-destruction. As in the case of de Sade, Ilyenkov's mistake resides in his very starting point: in a naïve-realist way, he presupposes reality as a Whole regulated by the necessity of progress and its reverse. Within this pre-modern space of a complete and self-regulating cosmos, radical negativity can only appear as a total self-destruction. The way out of this deadlock is to abandon the starting point and to admit that there is no reality as a self-regulated Whole, that reality is in itself cracked, incomplete, non-all, traversed by radical antagonism.

At the opposite pole from Bloch and Ilyenkov, we find Louis Althusser's structural Marxism in which he basically applies to Marxism Claude Lévi-Strauss's transcendentalism without the

(Kantian) subject. This list is, of course, far from complete, but one should note that, among the great Western Marxists, it was Theodor Adorno who, in his attention to the dialectics of Enlightenment, took over and explicated what we called Lukács's "pessimism": the roots of the horrors of twentieth-century history reside in the very heart of the Enlightenment project. What interests us here is that Adorno was ready to draw the philosophical consequences from this insight: with his notion of the "primacy [Vorrang] of the objective," he confronted the problem of how to break out of the transcendental approach without regressing to naïve realism. Although there is a similarity between Adorno's "primacy of the objective" and the Lacanian Real, this very similarity renders all the more palpable the gap that separates them. Adorno's basic endeavor is to reconcile the materialist "priority of the objective" with the idealist legacy of the subjective mediation of all objective reality: everything we experience as directly/immediately given is already mediated, posited through a network of differences; every theory that asserts our access to immediate reality, be it the phenomenological *Wesensschau* or the empiricist perception of elementary sensual data, is false. On the other hand, Adorno also rejects the idealist notion that all objective content is posited/produced by the subject; such a stance also fetishizes subjectivity itself into a given immediacy. This is the reason why Adorno opposes the Kantian apriori of the transcendental categories which mediate our access *to* reality (and thus constitute what we experience *as* reality): for Adorno, the Kantian transcendental apriori does not simply absolutize subjective mediation, it obliterates *its own* historical mediation. The table of Kantian transcendental categories is not a pre-historical "pure" apriori but a historically "mediated" conceptual network, i.e., a network embedded in and engendered by a determinate historical constellation. How, then, are we to think *together* the radical mediation of all objectivity and the materialist "priority of the objective"? The solution is that this "priority" is the very result of mediation

brought to its end, the kernel of resistance that we cannot experience directly, but only in the guise of the absent point of reference on account of which every mediation ultimately fails.

It is a standard argument against Adorno's "negative dialectics" to reproach it for its inherent inconsistency. Adorno's answer is quite appropriate: stated as a definitive doctrine, "negative dialectics" effectively *is*, as a result, "inconsistent"; the way to properly grasp it is to conceive of it as the description of a *process* of thought (in Lacanese, to include the position of enunciation involved in it). "Negative dialectics" designates a position which includes its own failure, i.e., which produces the truth-effect through its very failure. To put it succinctly: one tries to grasp or conceive the object of thought; one fails, misses it, and through these very failures the place of the targeted object is encircled, its contours become discernible. So, what one is tempted to do here is to introduce the Lacanian notion of the "barred" subject ($), and the object as real/impossible: the Adornian distinction between immediately accessible "positive" objectivity and the objectivity targeted in the "priority of the objective" is the very Lacanian distinction between (symbolically mediated) reality and the impossible Real. Furthermore, does the Adornian notion that the subject retains its subjectivity only insofar as it is "incompletely" subject, insofar as some kernel of objectivity resists its grasp, not point towards the subject as constitutively "barred"? This is why, when confronted with student protesters' claim that critical thought must adopt the standpoint of the oppressed, Adorno replied that negative dialectics was concerned "with the dissolution of standpoint thinking itself."[3]

In his critique of Hegel, Adorno surprisingly (or maybe not so surprisingly) rejoins his opponent Karl Popper, for whom, in his defense of the "open society," a straight road leads from the philosophical notion of totality to political totalitarianism.

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[3] Quoted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_W._Adorno.

His project of negative dialectics rejects what he (mis)perceives as Hegel's positive dialectics: in Hegel, all the antagonisms that explode in a dialectical process are resolved in a final reconciliation which establishes a new positive order. Hegel doesn't see that his reconciliation is dishonest, false, an "enforced reconciliation" (*erpresste Versöhnung*—the title of Adorno's essay on Lukács) which obfuscates the antagonisms' continuous persistence in social reality. Gérard Lebrun provided a perfect reply to this critique: "what is so admirable in this portrait of the dialectician rendered dishonest by his blindness is the supposition that he could have been honest" (Lebrun 2004, p. 115). In other words, instead of rejecting the Hegelian false reconciliation, one should reject as illusory the very notion of dialectical reconciliation, i.e., one should renounce the demand for a "true" reconciliation. Hegel was fully aware that reconciliation does not alleviate real suffering and antagonisms: his formula of reconciliation from the foreword to his *Philosophy of Right* is that one should recognize "the rose in the cross of the present" (Hegel 1991, p. 22), or, to put it in Marx's terms, in reconciliation, one does not change external reality to fit some Idea; one recognizes this Idea as the inner "truth" of this miserable reality itself. The Marxist reproach that, instead of transforming reality, Hegel only proposes its new interpretation, thus in a way misses the point—it knocks on an open door, since, for Hegel, in order to pass from alienation to reconciliation, one has to change not reality but the way we perceive it and relate to it. And the critique of Hegel's system as a return to closed identity which obfuscates the persisting antagonisms also knocks on an open door: the Hegelian reconciliation is the reconciliation *with* antagonisms.

There are two ways out of the deadlock in which Adorno's "negative dialectics" ends, the Habermasian one and the Lacanian one. Habermas, who well perceived Adorno's inconsistency, his self-destructive critique of Reason which cannot account for itself, proposed as a solution the pragmatic apriori of communicative

normativity, a kind of Kantian regulative ideal presupposed in every intersubjective exchange (Habermas 1982). With Habermas, the circle of Hegelian Marxism is closed, and the Kantian gap returns with a vengeance in the guise of the gap between communicative reason and instrumental reason. We are thus safely back in transcendental waters: Habermas's discursive ethics is a transcendental apriori which cannot be accounted for in terms of its objective genesis since it is always-already presupposed by any attempt at such a genesis. Directly asked by a journalist if he believes in god or not, Habermas said that he is agnostic, which precisely means that, in a Kantian way, he considers the ultimate nature of reality inaccessible: the unsurpassable firm point for us humans is the communicational apriori.

Habermas is to be read against the background of the fact that the progress of today's sciences shatters the basic presuppositions of our everyday life-world notion of reality. The establishment basically wants to have its cake and eat it: it needs science as the foundation of economic productivity, but it simultaneously wants to keep the ethico-political foundations of society free from science. The latest ethical "crisis" apropos of biogenetics effectively created the need for what one is fully justified in calling a "state philosophy": a philosophy that would, on the one hand, condone scientific research and technical progress, and, on the other, contain its full socio-symbolic impact, i.e., prevent it from posing a threat to the existing theologico-ethical constellation. No wonder those who come closest to meeting these demands are neo-Kantians: Kant himself was focused on the problem of how, while fully taking into account Newtonian science, one can guarantee that there is a space of ethical responsibility exempted from the reach of science—as he himself put it, he limited the scope of knowledge to create the space for faith and morality. And are today's state philosophers not facing the same task? Is their effort not focused on how, through different versions of transcendental reflection, to restrict science to its preordained horizon of mean-

ing and thus to denounce as "illegitimate" its consequences for the ethico-religious sphere?

The point to notice here is how the stances towards ontology that we have dealt with here are linked to basic political positions: neo-Kantianism grounds social-democratic reformism; the early Lukács's Hegelianism grounds his radical Leninist engagement (against the philosophical positions of Lenin himself); the ontology of dialectical materialism grounds Stalinist politics; Lukács's late ontology of social being grounds the (utopian) hopes of a humanist reform of the really-existing socialist regimes; negative dialectics echoes political defeat, the absence of any radical emancipatory prospect in the developed Western countries. When we talk about ways to overcome the transcendental circle, we are talking (also) about basic political orientations. So, what is the solution? A return to Hegel, but to a Hegel read in a different way, not in the sense of the total subjective mediation of objectivity in the style of young Lukács.

When Hegel says that the subject should recognize itself in its Otherness, this thesis is ambiguous: it can be (and usually is) read as the total subjective appropriation of all objective content, but it can also be read as claiming that the subject should recognize itself as a moment of its Otherness, in what appears to it as alienated objectivity. But, again, does this mean that we are back at naïve objective realism where the subject is just a moment in some substantial objective order? As we have already indicated, there is a third (and properly Hegelian) way that moves beyond this alternative of Fichtianism and Spinozism: yes, the subject recognizes itself as included in its Otherness, but not in the sense of a tiny cog in (or the summit of) some substantial cosmic order. The subject recognizes its own flaw (lack, failure, limitation) as grounded in the flaw (lack, failure, limitation—or rather, imbalance) that pertains to this cosmic order itself. The fact that the subject cannot fully objectivize itself doesn't mean that it dwells somewhere outside the objective order (of nature); it means that

this order is in itself incomplete, traversed by an impossibility. Far from signaling reconciliation with defeat, such a position opens up new prospects for radical action grounded in the redoubling of the lack.

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