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What Is to Be Done: On the Theatricality of Power

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What the World Ought To Be

In the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel famously claims that philosophy comes too late to teach us about what the world ought to be since "philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function" (Hegel 1991, p. 23). It appears that Hegel thus condemns philosophy to being a passive observer of world events, never capable of intervening in them. It seems that for Hegel, a philosopher is like a pathologist: by performing an autopsy, he or she can tell us the cause of death, but cannot provide us with anything that would have cured the patient when that patient was still alive. Furthermore, Hegel explicitly separates thought from actuality and places philosophy firmly after the fact: "As the *thought* of the world, [philosophy] appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its completed state" (ibid.). Is philosophical thinking a kind of an after-thought? Hegel appears to conceive of philosophy as an impotent practice of looking back at actuality, cognizing but never taking part. He writes, "When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk" (ibid.). The Hegelian philosopher is perhaps like that angel described by Walter Benjamin with Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in mind, whose

wings are caught in the wind of history, forever destined to observe the expanding spread of a single catastrophe, never able to look away from the past and never able to intervene.

Unsurprisingly, Marxism forcefully rejected Hegel on this point. Marx himself made this perfectly clear in the infamous thesis eleven, where he claims that philosophers have only ever interpreted the world, but the point is to change it. Mladen Dolar argues that thesis eleven, apparently calling for revolutionary action, is a direct refutation of Hegel's assertion that philosophy always arrives too late: "The owl of Minerva would be the very epitome of philosophy which always comes too late and can merely interpret" (Dolar 2015, p. 885). However, it was not only revolutionaries who criticized Hegel. In fact, the separation of thought from actuality, expressed in the conclusion of the Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, is inconsistent with Hegel's own assertions elsewhere. It is in the very same Preface, only a few pages back, that we find another equally important and equally far-reaching formula proposed by Hegel: "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational" (p. 20). Assuming for the time being that philosophy could be described as the business of the rational—an assumption which is certainly not without its consequences—this formula directly opposes the notion of philosophy arriving too late to act. If anything, it puts philosophy, or more precisely thought itself, at the very core of what actually is. At the very least, what the discord between these claims indicates is that Hegel understands the work of philosophy as a complex relationship between actuality and thought. It indicates that the claim about philosophy arriving too late, or only after the fact, is perhaps not simply a condemnation of philosophy. Could it be that this claim "condemns" actuality itself? Could the too-lateness of philosophy indicate a too-lateness of some sort within the fabric of actuality itself, an instability at the very core of (historical, political) reality? If so, what could this ontological too-lateness mean?

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Instead, let us begin with a very straightforward, even naïve question: What specifically does philosophy, according to Hegel, come too late to do? On this point, Hegel is extremely clear: philosophy comes too late *to teach us*, *to instruct us* about what is to be done. The first general claim that I wish to make is that, without any doubt, Hegel is *completely correct* in making this point. Not only does it not contradict the claim that the rational is actual and the actual rational, it can, in fact, only be properly understood with and through that claim. The actual is the rational; *therefore*, philosophy cannot but reflect or express rational actuality in the medium of thought. (I employ here language that is very similar to Spinoza's quite deliberately, the reasons for which will become clear soon.) This injunction works *vice versa* as well: it is precisely because thought does not constitute a realm of its own, independent of the world, that philosophical thinking cannot simply subtract itself from actuality and consider such actuality as pure matter which it might shape according to its own design, independent of that matter itself. The thinking subject does not primarily exist in itself and only secondarily intervene in the actual world; this is, I argue, why Hegel evokes the ancient maxim *Hic Rhodus, hic salta* (ibid., p. 21; Hegel writes *saltus*). We cannot save ourselves the trouble of engaging with the world by evoking some counterfactual ideal circumstances on the island of Rhodes.

This is a fundamental lesson for all political philosophy. It is a grave mistake if we expect philosophy to give us a simple set of instructions or guidelines to live by, to tell us what is to be done in each particular historical situation. Hegel writes explicitly about his work: "This treatise, therefore, in so far as it deals with political science, shall be nothing other than an attempt to comprehend and portray the state as an inherently rational entity. As a philosophical composition, it must distance itself as far as possible from the obligation to construct a state as it ought to be; such instruction as it may contain cannot be aimed at instructing the state on how

it ought to be, but rather at showing how the state, as the ethical universe, should be recognized" (ibid., p. 21). Hegel's point about the nature of political science, or more precisely political philosophy, is almost the same as the point Spinoza makes so brilliantly in the opening of his *Political Treatise*:

> Philosophers look upon the passions, by which we are assailed, as vices into which men fall through their own fault. So it is their custom to deride, bewail, berate them, or, if their purpose is to appear more zealous than others, to execrate them. They believe that they are thus performing a sacred duty, and that they are attaining the summit of wisdom when they have learnt how to shower extravagant praise on a human nature that nowhere exists and to revile that which exists in actuality. The fact is that they conceive men not as they are, but as they would like them to be. As a result, for the most part it is not ethics they have written, but satire; and they have never worked out a political theory that can have practical application, only one that borders on fantasy. (Spinoza 2002, p. 680)

Spinoza makes it very clear that we can either become moralists and chastise people, or get involved in what he calls an analysis of "what exists in actuality." Moralists will always know exactly what ought to be done—but that is why no amount of moralism can ever add up to or lead to a proper political philosophy. In political philosophy, you are either a moralist or a political philosopher in the proper sense of the word. Either you chastise people about what they should be like or what they ought to do, or else you analyze the concrete relationships between men such as they exist in the world.

Spinoza and Hegel thus form a firm block within the field of political philosophy. We should immediately add another pair of authors to this list: Marx and Engels. They make almost exactly the same point in *The German Ideology* when they denounce all attempts made by philosophers to, as they phrase it, "descend from heaven down to earth." Instead, they propose an analysis

of "real, active men," and seek to explain people's ideas and the general ideology of the period from that vantage point:

> The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstractions can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. (Marx and Engels 2016, p. 42)

The theoretical move that Marx and Engels make in *The German Ideology* is actually quite complex and convoluted when compared to that of Spinoza, because they are not simply criticizing moralism in political philosophy; they are criticizing the Young Hegelians, such as Feuerbach, who are actually *themselves* critical, at least to an extent, of the moralist approach. The problem of the Young Hegelians, as Marx and Engels make abundantly clear, is that they attempt to criticize an idea from the standpoint of another idea. In the Preface to *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels make a programmatic claim about the Young Hegelians' attempts to produce a revolution: "Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. […] Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; says the second, to take up a critical attitude to them; says the third, to knock them out of their heads; and—existing reality will collapse" (Marx and Engels 2016, p. 37). This theoretical move is complex because Marx and Engels do, in principle, agree with Feuerbach that men make false conceptions about themselves. It is just that Marx and Engels do not believe that such false conceptions could be uprooted simply by teaching people the apparent truth about themselves.

With regard to this concern, we can draw another parallel with Spinoza's philosophy. In *Ethics*, Spinoza makes a distinction

between an adequate and an inadequate idea, where inadequate ideas are ideas that people form spontaneously based on the accidental encounters of their bodies with other bodies in the world. Deleuze explains that "the only ideas we have under the natural conditions of our perception are [thus] the ideas that represent what *happens* to our body, the effect of another body on ours, that is, a mixing of both bodies" (Deleuze 1988, p. 73). Spinoza's point is that even when we are capable of forming an adequate idea, the inadequate idea—which is our imaginary representation of ourselves and the world we live in—will not simply disperse! Genevieve Lloyd puts this aptly: "the imagination has a resilience which can coexist with the knowledge of its inadequacy" (Lloyd 1996, p. 66). An adequate idea can therefore replace an inadequate idea not simply and solely by virtue of being the truth, but only by virtue of functioning within the constitution of the body as the stronger affect. The notion of the resilience of the imagination and its coexistence with the knowledge of its inadequacy, I claim, opens up the space for a Marxist intervention in Spinoza. What Marx and Engels criticize in Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians is precisely the notion that an organized (yet inadequate) idea could be dispersed simply by pointing out that it is not the truth; or that everything one needs to do in order to be a revolutionary is to perform such unveilings. In addition, Spinoza's refutation of the Cartesian doctrine of the subject's free will as the cause of both actions and errors—a doctrine that would allow for true ideas to directly influence the subject's behavior in the material world—strongly resonates with Hegel's claim that philosophy cannot simply instruct us on how to act in our historical moment.

In short, even though Marx and Engels explicitly criticize Hegel's philosophy and Hegel's dialectics, and even though Hegel is highly suspicious of the Spinozist rationalist project, on this fundamental point about how a proper political philosophy should be practiced, they all firmly agree. On this point, thinkers such as Spinoza, Hegel and Marx form a block within the field of

political philosophy. At the same time, we must also be careful to note the differences between individual formulations of this principle. While Spinoza draws a line between what the world is and what the world ought to be, Hegel introduces a specific category of knowledge, or cognizance: *Erkennen*. For Hegel, philosophical knowledge is never simply an abstract or arbitrary idea about what the world ought to be. It clearly belongs to the realm of actuality, even necessity. However, knowledge is also not simply and immediately that which is. For Hegel, there is some tension between the immediate and that which is actual-and-rational. I will return to this in the conclusion.

What Is to Be Done?

One may protest against the present considerations with the following objection: even if it appears philosophically sound and sensible to argue that philosophy cannot provide instructions on what the world ought to be, the field of political practice cannot afford to take such an impractical position. Political action, whether it is a minor political reform or a revolutionary restructuring of the political power on the grand scale, requires a goal. Now, a political goal can, of course, be either a noble one or an abominable one, but one way or the other, whether the political subject acts with good or bad intentions, they certainly act with their goal in view. Clearly, then, one must be able to suggest a roadmap, a course of action to be taken, or at the very least a general strategy, all of which inevitably amounts to having at least some kind of an answer to the question of what is to be done. For if this were not the case, and if we could imagine a political subject who acts without any goal whatsoever and only improvises his or her moves on the spot, then the very political move they perform "loses the name of action" (as Hamlet puts it) and becomes a mere reaction. And if, furthermore, our imagined political subject never takes matters

into their own hands but only reacts and improvises, this may, granted, provide good material for a theatrical piece, even one of Shakespearean proportions, but it can scarcely serve as a model for political practice in the real world. Moreover, we would be perfectly entitled to claim that what presented itself as a political subject in our little thought experiment is actually anything but, since they have relinquished their right to subjectivity and become a mere pawn in a game played by other people. Indeed, we would have to agree with Hamlet that it is Fortinbras who truly acts, and that Hamlet himself is only a profoundly lacking subject.

The premise of the objection is the claim that political philosophy should not be confused with political practice. To an extent, this takes us back to what Marx argues in thesis eleven and to many controversies within, as well as outside of, Marxist thought. As suggested above, one should note that Marx's argument cannot be reduced to a simplistic and naïve distinction between theory and practice, or thought and action, and that we should consider it as a distinction between two types of political analyses. Spinoza, Hegel and Marx would certainly not subscribe to such a simplistic distinction, and they would not consider their political analyses as "mere thought" without any immediate consequence for political practice. The precise relationship between theory and practice is another hefty affair within materialist philosophy, a relationship that Louis Althusser painstakingly tried to bring to light throughout his work. Instead of trailing these long debates, let us plunge into the discussion with a straightforward question: How would someone like Fortinbras, someone who is deeply involved in political, revolutionary practice, respond to the question of "what is to be done"?

As it turns out, we have to look no further than Lenin, who published his response in the notorious essay titled *What is to be done?* As one would expect, Lenin did provide some practical advice—for instance, he called for unity and the consolidation of revolutionary forces, especially of voices published in the revolu-

tionary press. However, Lenin's concluding remarks to the essay are actually, and perhaps surprisingly, not a list of things to be done, but rather a brief historical overview of social democracy in Russia. Lenin describes this history as falling into three distinct periods and claims that the contemporary, third period is a period of great advances but also of some discord among the leaders. Specifically, he evokes the image of a youth whose voice starts to change during adolescence; the current state of affairs, the third period, is thus compared to adolescence, and it is clear that Lenin wants to argue for some sort of "growing up," for "becoming an adult." At least from Kant's text on the Enlightenment onward, it is clear that the metaphor of growing up is an extremely powerful political metaphor.[1] In the brief Conclusion, Lenin finishes his text by summing up his historical periodization and looking into the future.

> *When* the third period will come to an end and the fourth (now heralded by many portents) will begin we do not know. We are passing from the sphere of history to the sphere of the present and, partly, of the future. But we firmly believe that the fourth period will lead to the consolidation of militant Marxism, that Russian Social-Democracy will emerge from the crisis in the full flower of manhood, that the opportunist rearguard will be "replaced" by the genuine vanguard of the most revolutionary class. (Lenin 1902)

As Lenin imagines them, with a host of military metaphors, the historical periods are changing places one after another in a manner similar to a change of guards. Clearly, he wants to convince his readers that the moment for such a change (смена) has come, that "the third period" of social democracy in Russia is at an end and that the fourth is on the horizon. This allows him to summarize his text in a truly fascinating finale:

[1] Of course, this move by Lenin was extremely controversial at the time, but this is not the subject of this paper.

> In the sense of calling for such a "replacement" (смена) and by way of summing up what has been expounded above, we may meet the question, What is to be done? with the brief reply:
>
> Put an End to (Ликвидировать) the Third Period. (Ibid.)

I find this abrupt, curt, but also absolutely clear and direct conclusion stunning, because it suggests that the answer to the burning political question of the day requires the work of a *historian* rather than a policy maker. Better yet, it seems that for Lenin, political action in the proper meaning of the term, at least in the final move of this text, is a gesture of the historian, a gesture of the writer, a formal gesture of placing a full stop at the end of a historical period. What is needed is precisely for our own historical period to be recognized as such, *and thus liquidated*. The abrupt response is also clearly paradoxical inasmuch as it demands from us to be our own historians, the historians of our own present moment. It seems that Lenin's answer rejects the very premise of the question asking what is to be done. It says something along the lines of the famous political slogan, "*We are the ones we have been waiting for.*"

My point here is that not even a revolutionary such as Lenin, who clearly had a goal and a plan, and who stood with both feet in the very nexus of world events, can truly instruct us, in a manner of writing a manual, in what is to be done. The very question is wrong, because what is to be done is not an action we could abstractly choose among many; rather, it is the realization that we ourselves are the actual political subject and the actual historical agent. The solid, factual texture of our social and political *status quo* cracks open from within, not from without; the future intervenes from within the present itself.

I claim that Hegel had precisely this intervention of historical destiny in the actuality of the present in mind when he recalled the Latin proverb *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*. On this point, we can

therefore read Hegel's Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* through Lenin's Conclusion to *What Is to Be Done?* When Hegel says that philosophy cannot rejuvenate a historical period, a specific "shape of life," that it can only recognize it, he is not expounding a certain defect of philosophy, but precisely its politically important task. "When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old," writes Hegel. Is this not precisely what Lenin says is required: to recognize the third period for what it is, to paint it grey in grey, and by this very action to allow it to pass away, *to liquidate it*? To articulate this crucial point once more: when Hegel tells us that philosophy comes too late to instruct us on what is to be done, this is not a declaration of its political impotence, but quite the opposite. I opened this paper with a metaphor implying that, for Hegel, philosophy is only ever able to perform an autopsy, a *post festum* analysis of world affairs, but it is inevitably too late on the scene to cure the patient. With Lenin, we can now be more specific about what this image gets right: the task of philosophy has never been to cure our present moment, as sorrowful as it may present itself to us, but precisely, through the labor of cognizing it, to let it grow old and let it pass away. The English language has a beautiful word, *execution*, which expresses the performative action of carrying something into effect as well as the notion of carrying out a death sentence. I therefore suggest that philosophy, according to Hegel, is precisely the delicate art of execution.

A Matter of Life and Death

Comparing the work of philosophy to the work of anatomy is, of course, not coincidental. Hegel himself makes this comparison in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He writes that, in philosophy, one cannot simply state one's aims, nor can one skip the process of cognizance itself (*Erkenntnis*) and directly list the

results. He draws parallels with the science of anatomy in the very first paragraph and argues that "if a person were to have only a general notion of, for example, anatomy, or, to put it roughly, if he were to have an acquaintance with the parts of the body taken in accordance with their lifeless existence, nobody would thereby think that he has come into full possession of the salient subject matter of that science" (Hegel 2019, p. 3). It is a somewhat perplexing example, because the science of anatomy has in fact made great advances precisely by studying the lifeless existence of cadavers and corpses. Hegel further explains that philosophy, too, must proceed by treating its subject matter as some sort of a living organism. Various philosophical systems in history are not competitors in an abstract game of grasping a timeless and immutable truth, wherein some are correct and score points while others are not and miss their shots. Instead, Hegel argues that they are (all) historically necessary; he famously compares the contradictions between them to the organic process of a plant, where the bud is refuted by the blossom, which is in turn refuted by the fruit. In the third paragraph, Hegel writes that in philosophy, the subject matter is not simply exhausted in its aims, its end results:

> The aim for itself is the lifeless universal in the way that the tendency of the work itself is a mere drive that still lacks actuality; the unadorned result is just the corpse that has left the tendency behind. (Hegel 2019, p. 5)

Assuming that the work of philosophy could be distilled into a bulleted list of results would be like assuming that we might grasp the functioning of a living organism by quartering a body and displaying its parts for view. In philosophy, a result—or, for that matter, a political instruction—is like a dead organ. Philosophy aims to capture life, and bare results are nothing but cadavers; on this point, Hegel is clearly repeating the gesture of Fichte. However, as I hope to demonstrate, the difference between Hegel and Fichte is nevertheless quite significant. Recall how

Fichte argues that his *System of Knowledge* is a completely novel philosophical enterprise:

> The Science of Knowledge is a very different matter [from other philosophical systems]. Its chosen topic of consideration is not a lifeless concept, passively exposed to its inquiry merely, of which it makes something only by its own thought, but a living and active thing which engenders insights from and through itself, and which the philosopher merely contemplates. His role in the affair goes no further than to translate this living force into purposeful activity, to observe the activity in question, to apprehend it and grasp it as a unity. (Fichte 1982, p. 30)

In short, Fichte argues that the novelty of his system lies in the fact that it treats the object of knowledge as a living thing. By contrast, what other philosophical systems are doing is not unlike the work of Dr. Frankenstein:

> The philosopher of the first type, by contrast, is fashioning an artefact. In the object of his labours he reckons only upon the matter, not upon an inner, self-active force thereof. Before he goes to work, this inner force must already have been killed, or it would offer resistance to his efforts. From this dead mass he fashions something, purely through his own powers, and in accordance only with his own concept, already devised beforehand. (Ibid.)

What Fichte articulates so clearly, and so well, is that philosophy, insofar as it follows an already devised concept, is merely fashioning an artifact from a dead mass; what is thereby lost is precisely the living "self-active" force of the philosopher's object. It seems that Fichte and Hegel both argue that the proper philosophical perspective is to treat the topic of concern as a living force, and they both seem to refer, explicitly or not, to the science of anatomy. "Science may organize itself only through the proper life of the concept," writes Hegel in no uncertain terms (Hegel 2019, p. 33).

And yet, as it turns out especially in the later passages of the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for Hegel, philosophy's relationship to the work of a pathologist, and to life itself, is much more complicated. At some point, it seems that life and death change places, so that true philosophy no longer stands on the side of life, but rather on the side of death. Hegel's point is not that a scientific object should be killed before it can be properly observed, but that theoretical observation itself is an act of execution, the very act of bringing death. In this sense, Hegel writes about understanding as "the most astonishing and the greatest of all the powers" (Hegel 2019, p. 20). It is understanding itself that is to be considered as the activity of separating the actual (*das Wirkliche*) from its immediate context. He describes this power in the following way:

> However, that the accidental, separated from its surroundings, being bound to other actualities and only existing in their context, attains an isolated freedom and its own proper existence—this is the tremendous power of the negative. It is the energy of thinking, of the pure I. Death, if that is what we wish to call that non-actuality (*Unwirklichkeit*), is the most fearful thing of all, and to keep and hold fast to what is dead requires only the greatest force. (Hegel 2019, p. 20, corrected translation)

The power of thought, the power of the pure I as Hegel understands it, is the tremendous power to detach a contingency from its immediate context and set it free. It is thought itself, this non-actuality itself, that gives to something contingent an existence and freedom of its own. It picks it up from its immediate context and raises it to the level of an idea. And this power is what Hegel calls "death," and he further claims that "this power is the same as what in the preceding was called the subject" (Hegel 2019, p. 21).

This is a very complex argument, compressed in a very short paragraph. I take the passage to mean that pure subjectivity, which is the same as thought itself, is the absolute power of the negative,

or death itself. If this account of the passage is correct, it allows us to argue that the relationship of philosophy to its subject matter is, for Hegel, neither like that of the science of anatomy, which proceeds by examining cadavers and corpses, nor like that of Fichte's science of knowledge, which only translates the living force to purposeful activity. For Hegel, the work of the philosopher is precisely the work of the liquidator, the executor. Philosophy is not simply too-late to intervene in actuality (*das Wirkliche*); rather, its power is precisely the power of the non-actual, the power of setting actuality free and grasping it as an idea. This is what Hegel properly calls the subject. We thus come back to the question of the utmost political urgency, to the question of what is to be done—which is why I believe Hegel's answer could be paraphrased with Lenin. What our historical period demands that we do is that we grasp it as a historical period both in its necessity and its unity, to set it free and thus to liquidate it.

By reading Hegel through Lenin it becomes clear that the materialist approach to political philosophy does not eradicate political subjectivity (at least not necessarily; for the purposes of this paper, we will leave the question of subjectivity in Spinoza unanswered).[2] However, in materialist analyses, the political

[2] The discussion surrounding Spinoza's concept of the subject is very much alive. Caroline Williams, for instance, distinguishes between the subject and the place (or the scene) of the subject and presents the idea of a "subjectivity without the subject" in Spinoza (Williams 2012, p. 172). Williams makes it quite clear that, for her, "the matter of subjectivity is always a political matter" and argues for the necessity of a (new) materialist concept of subjectivity, a concept beyond the metaphysical construction of the subject: "If it is the case that human subjects can no longer be understood to stand alone as the single principle or fulcrum of organisation for collective life, a stronger materialist account is required of the morphology of subjectivity, its coming into being as an arrangement of parts or as a temporary formation that might be subject to capture or combination, containment, exchange, and transformation. It is these political relations of figuration and mutation that my own engagement with Spinoza intends to develop" (Williams 2016).

subject does not appear as the Cartesian subject of thinking, as an external agent for whom engagement with the world appears as one option among many. Instead, the world of Cartesian subjects is part of the objective world of political analysis itself. This explains why such analysis inevitably comes "too late" to help those particular subjects in question. At the same time, this philosophical position produces an even more astonishing consequence, one that I have been hinting at from the very beginning: the structure of actuality itself appears as something cracked from within, as something already affected by, or even infected with, subjectivity.

Monarchy, Subjectivity, Performativity

Let us return to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. As is well known, Hegel argued that the state, precisely insofar as it is an entity of reason, requires a monarch. Perhaps surprisingly, Hegel adds that what is required of the monarch is not wisdom in making just universal laws, but solely to appear as a contingent subjectivity that formally declares the law. Hegel writes, "In a fully organized state, it is only a question of the highest instance of formal decision, and all that is required in a monarch is someone to say 'yes' and to dot the 'i'; for the supreme office should be such that the particular character of its occupant is of no significance" (Hegel 1991, p. 323). This purely formal instance of sanctioning the law, with no affirmative content that would depend on the monarch's character, is what Hegel believes is required for a law to become an actual law. This idea has been widely commented on in Hegel scholarship, but two of the central claims made are especially interesting for our analysis. First, this office, whose occupant's particular character is of no significance, is exemplary of the subject. Jean-Luc Nancy writes that the "necessity of the monarch follows from the very necessity, the most absolute and compelling there is, of subjectivity or of Spirit" (Nancy 1982,

p. 486). For Žižek, "the Monarch is thus a subject par excellence" (Žižek 2008, p. 252). Second, the formal gesture of saying "yes" or "I will it" or "dotting the i's" is widely recognized as a performative gesture. "This transformation of abstract will into concrete will is a performative (*performation*)" (Nancy 1982, p. 505). Žižek writes, for instance, that "the monarch's authority is purely 'performative'" (Žižek 2014b, p. 33); he argues that the monarch's addition to the law "adds no new content, it just performatively registers something that is already here" (Žižek 2012, p. 236). Nancy argues that the instant of the declaration of the law is also the instant of making the decision: "Not only does his mouth open, but he himself—and not the councils or the assemblies—decides" (Nancy 1982, p. 510). Following Nancy, Žižek describes the instantaneous nature of the monarch's declaration as "the moment of enunciation with regard to a series of statements: through his act, statements prepared by the state bureaucracy acquire performative power, become actualized" (Žižek 2012, p. 461). Let me comment on both of these claims.

The claim that the monarch constitutes the perfect example of (Hegelian) subjectivity is fully supported by the text itself, since Hegel writes that "in a well-ordered monarchy, the objective aspect is solely the concern of the law, to which the monarch merely has to add his subjective 'I will'" (Hegel 1991, p. 323). Hegel overwhelmingly binds the notion of subjectivity in reference to the monarch to the purely formal instant of an individual making a decision, such as in the description of "subjectivity as the ultimate decision of the will (*die letzte Willensentscheidung*)" (Hegel 1991, p. 308). This means that not only does the subjectivity of the state reside in the monarch's act of making the decision (in the purely formal "yes"), but this decision is, in addition, merely an expression of the monarch's will, and not his or her conscience or feeling ("I will it so," without any moral or other justification). The monarch lacks any positive aspect, and we may truly surmise that this purely formal, void instance of sovereignty

is indeed what Hegel elsewhere determines as the negative power of the subject. The monarch, by recognizing the (objective) law as his own (subjective) will, even though he has not contributed to its content in any meaningful way, performs the function of the subject.

However, we can hardly accept the notion of a purely ceremonial monarch as our own modern concept of political subjectivity. It obviously lacks the dimension of agency. Contemporary monarchs, as well as heads of state with virtually no executive or legislative duties except signing bills into laws (such as in "chancellor democracies"), do indeed partake in a socially required performance or ceremony, yet this "dotting of the i's" clearly doesn't amount to anything close to historical agency. Contemporary examples of constitutional monarchies could perhaps serve as models of well-ordered states, at least some of them, at least sometimes, but it is completely clear that the ceremonial monarchs of these countries do not appear to us as historical agents. They are not what Hegel refers to as "world historical individuals," leaders of men, such as Caesar or Napoleon. Apparently, there is a difference between a purely ceremonial act and a performance or execution of a political action.

The function of the monarch, his ceremonial "I do," fits J. L. Austin's description of performative utterances; the declaration of a law, often a publicized ceremony, is precisely what inaugurates that law as a law. But with Austin's theory of performative utterances alone, there is no way for us to distinguish between a ceremony and a ceremony, that is to say, between a ceremony *within* the domain of the law (for instance, a wedding ceremony) and a ceremony which *constitutes* the lawful order itself (the declaration of Law). In other words, if the law—moral or political—is the ultimate authority that must support an utterance in order for it to count as performative, then by what measure do we validate the context of the declaration of the Law as such? We can only assert tautologies such as "the law is the law," "the king

is the king," etc., which led Hegel to claim that the declaration of law is nothing but a mere formality, a formality as such, and that the king is nothing but his own performance. Hegel, arguing for a constitutional monarchy of reason, denies that the monarch's authority should ultimately reside in the authority of God and that it is consequent enough to reject any other authority, including the authority of reason. The authority of Hegel's monarch is thus purely performative. Here, we can clearly observe an element of what is known in another context as the doctrine of papal infallibility; Hegel's monarch retains (or perhaps embodies the perfect form of) the central characteristic of the feudal monarchy, the principle of *l'État, c'est moi*.[3]

This allows us to determine what exactly is unsatisfactory about Hegel's idea of the constitutional monarch: it says too much, but at the same time, it does not say enough. It says too much, because Hegel argues that this function must be executed by a contingent individuality, which he understands as *one* individual (a *mon*-arch). Why not a class of individuals, as Marx suggested? In addition, Hegel presupposes that this contingent individuality is self-identical, performed by one and the same person over a substantial period of time. Hegel's reasons for these theoretical choices are certainly insufficient. At the same time, and perhaps even more importantly, Hegel's notion of the constitutional monarch does not go far enough. I suspect that it is precisely by identifying the category of political subjectivity with the person of a contingent individuality (with "this" particular monarch) that Hegel fails

[3] Zdravko Kobe points out, albeit with criticism, that Hegel consistently understood the figure of the monarch as "*the political version of the ontological proof of God's existence*," which means that the political decision is ultimately "*immediate* and *groundless*" (Kobe 2015, pp. 169–170, italics in the original). The groundlessness of the law is precisely what makes it purely performative, though, and it is thus *actually* true precisely inasmuch as it is *potentially* true. This groundlessness of the law is also that which allows Jure Simoniti to articulate the notion of "the opaque core of sociality" (Simoniti 2020, p. 203).

to make a distinction between a merely ceremonial sanctioning of a particular law and the truly historical event of the inauguration of the order of Law itself. Hegel's constitutional monarch is a ceremonial figurehead, a mascot, a professional actor. He is the embodiment of that which can never become what Hegel so pompously described as the "world historical individual." In fact, as long as the ceremonial monarch rules (or "rules"), as long as he or she remains on the scene, we can be quite certain that nothing will disturb the usual process of the well-oiled machine, the state.

The Theatricality of Power

Hegel's concept of the ceremonial monarch brings to the fore of political analysis a dimension which I suggest we call *the theatricality of power*. This term denotes the performative character of the order of the law, or the groundlessness of the order of the political reality of any given historical social formation. Political power is theatrical precisely inasmuch as its functioning is not grounded in or supported by any natural entity or force, but exists solely through and in its own performances and declarations. We could also paraphrase Hegel and claim that political power has the structure of ontotheology. It would be trivial to note that animals and plants do not care about political borders or concepts; the claim here is precisely the opposite: the constitution of political reality is in the ultimate analysis completely independent of the world of natural forces and inclinations. This is why all political philosophy that limits itself to proscribing a more or less effective set of tools to regulate natural human interests, needs and passions remains solely on the level of giving us moral advice, clueless as to why it may appear that people are not behaving with their best rational interests in mind.

Is the theatricality of power irreconcilable with Hegel's notion of world historical individuals, such as Caesar or Napoleon, who are precisely not mere figureheads of the political community

but men of action, men who took the risk and crossed the Rubicon, leaders and drivers of historical change? Inasmuch as their power is not purely ceremonial but emphatically executive, one could assume that they somehow fall outside of the regime of the theatricality of power. Did we relapse, in a certain sense, back to the dubious dichotomy of thesis eleven, only that it is now no longer a question of interpretation versus change, but a question of political performance and the performance of the political? According not only to Marx of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* but also to Hegel himself, this would be a mistake. This is where the notion of historical repetition becomes crucial: for Hegel, Caesar's historical importance lies not so much in the great feats he has accomplished, but rather beyond them, beyond his own death even, in the fact that even though he has died, the idea of "Caesar" has survived, the idea of one individual reigning over the entire Roman state. Commenting on Caesar's demise at the hands of the Roman aristocracy, Hegel says, "Clearly the reining in of one individual personality did not succeed. […] Such a great change had to take place twice, the fact that one person came to be the ruler. We say that 'once does not count', in the sense that what takes place once can happen by chance. Thus Augustus had to follow, just as Napoleon had to be dethroned twice. Augustus first of all, and then Tiberius, brought about the continuance of the form of the state" (Hegel 2011, p. 446). The mention of Napoleon in this context gives us a clear idea why Marx thought of this passage (most probably) when commenting on the coup staged by his nephew, Napoleon III. In the TWA edition of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, the link between chance and repetition is even clearer: "The noblest men of Rome believed Caesar's reign to be a matter of chance (*etwas zufälliges*). […] That which only seemed contingent (*zufällig*) and possible (*möglich*) in the beginning, becomes something actual (*Wirkliche*) and confirmed (*Bestätigte*) through repetition" (Hegel TWA 12, p. 380, my translation). The notion of the world historical individual breaks down into two distinct moments. The first moment is occupied by

the physical body of Caesar, the immense sum of all his political and military feats, uniting Rome and the world under the rule of one. It is, however, only the second moment, the repetition of Caesar in Octavian Augustus, which *retroactively* makes and confirms Caesar as a world historical individual, as the physical embodiment of the idea of the rule of one. We also notice a third moment appear in the shadows of this exchange of the physical body of Caesar with the idea of Caesar's rule of one, the instance that confirms and actualizes, the instance that is presented with the minimal possible description: the instance of *repetition*. We must read this passage, I argue, in combination with the passage from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on the power of pure thought, which tears (historical) contingency out of its immediate context and gives it an independent freedom and an isolated existence (of a historical event). This instance, referred to in the *Lectures* simply as repetition, is Hegel's true notion of historical agency, of true political subjectivity. Caesar is a contingent possibility, it is his repetition in "Caesar" that makes the contingency actual, that constitutes a historical actuality. Caesar is a matter for chronicles; "Caesar" is a matter of the philosophy of history.[4]

Thus it seems that the performative subjectivity of the ceremonial monarch and the executive action of the world historical individual are nevertheless related to one another. The work of Caesar, fully immersed in the nexus of world events, requires an instance of "repetition," an instance of the official sanctioning of that work, which isolates it and gives it formal recognition. The actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) of Caesar, insofar as it is immediate and bound to its circumstances, remains contingent and a matter of

[4] In a slightly different context, Bara Kolenc remarks that "Hegel's dialectics as such is nothing but repetition *par excellence*" (Kolenc 2015, p. 207). Kolenc writes this with regard to Hegel's *Science of Logic*, but it is perhaps even clearer in Hegel's philosophy of history, precisely insofar as we understand repetition in the sense described here, as the name for the very operation of reason which transforms a contingent possibility into a conceptual necessity.

chance; what is required in order to grasp it in its necessity is precisely the recognition that it *was*, indeed, the actual (*das Wirkliche*). Every Napoleon requires his Hegel to be recognized as a historical necessity and sanctioned as an avatar of the world spirit. Hegel is correct, in the Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, to emphasize that the act of recognition (*Erkenntnis*) can only come "too late" with regard to that which is recognized in its gaze. At the same time, however, this too-lateness is inscribed in the very structure of (political, historical) reality itself, because actuality is constituted as such only retroactively, only through the performative, purely formal confirmation that it is "indeed" the actuality.

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