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A Critique of Critique. On the semantic erosion of a concept

Wolfert von Rahden

Hamlet as Trauerspiel?

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Objective Alienation: No ‘essentialism’, nowhere

Lukas Meisner

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Contents

Retrieving the universalism of critical sociology — Adorno, Hegel, and Rose	5
<i>Nigel Tubbs</i>	
A Critique of Critique. On the semantic erosion of a concept	31
<i>Wolfert von Rahden</i>	
Hamlet as Trauerspiel?	43
<i>Howard Eiland</i>	
Kracauer, Kant, and the Detectives	63
<i>Gray Kochhar-Lindgren</i>	
Objective Alienation: No ‘essentialism’, nowhere	95
<i>Lukas Meisner</i>	

Retrieving the universalism of critical sociology— Adorno, Hegel, and Rose.

*Nigel Tubbs*¹

Abstract: Universalism (as an abstraction) has fallen into disrepute, and with it, the concept of the ‘social’ has fallen to the heterogeneity of the other. But to what extent is this another victory for the power of abstraction in the free market that shapes consciousness in its own image? In many respects, the protests against the domination implicit in universalist claims has been empowering for the marginalized and the excluded. But abstract universality so dominates the theorizing of the universal and the protests launched against it, that it also marginalizes and excludes anything other than abstract versions of the universal, therein denying the struggles for inclusion and justice appeal to any *other* or different concepts of universality. As such, it denies universal significance to any critique of abstraction. Perhaps it requires something of Adorno’s critical sociology and Gillian Rose’s speculative sociology to retrieve a universalism here. And if a retrieval of social universalism can challenge the universalism of abstract forms of consciousness by way of a retrieval of critical sociological consciousness, then this commends us to re-examine what sociological consciousness was, what its conditions of possibility were, and what shapes it might take in any reappearance.

Universalism (as an abstraction) has fallen into disrepute, and rightly so. Grand narratives of history are now exposed for their one-size-fits-all philosophy, claiming absolute universal validity, and grounding that validity in the *Weltanschauung* of the white, western, anthropocentric male. The sovereignty of masterful conceptuality has fallen to difference and been exposed as resentment, and structural over-determination has fallen to local narratives. But the Janus-face of these defeats is that the universalism of the concept of the ‘social’ has fallen to the heterogeneity of the other. It requires something of Adorno’s critical sociology to be able to point out just how much, and in what ways, free-market consciousness has been the condition of the possibility of this collapse of the universality of the social, and how the market then continues to take full advantage of it.

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In the face of this collapse of universalism, how can the universal still be theorized? This question invokes conceptual, practical and political responses. Plato's *Politeia*, Kant's three *Critiques*, and Hegelian-Marxist philosophy have each tried to unite the conceptual, practical and political into theories of universality. But each has also shown how the experience of the universal disrupts definitions of the universal. An *individual* experience of the *universal* has the universal as an object over against it and has the *particular* as a part of that object. Three, here, does not make a crowd (or a collective or a society). The individual is not the whole or a part but is the experience of both of them. As such, the experience of the universal has not been a universal experience. Instead, it has been an experience of being dominated by intellectual conception, by moral compliance, and by political power. Each domination enjoys its own form of legitimacy as forms of 'law' embracing the racism, colonialism, sexism and anthropocentrism within the hierarchy, science, classification, and mastery of the great chain of being, the philosophy of history, and grand narratives in general. Such domination is often regarded as definitive justification for the politics of inclusion and social justice to reject any and all claims to universality.

Perhaps critical sociology still has the resources to be able to theorize that there is a universalism at work in such critiques of universalism. It is the universalism of *abstraction*. Abstraction, whether in Plato's cave, Marx's fetishism, or Adorno's identity thinking, involves concealing the conditions of possibility that are nevertheless presupposed in creating the appearance of equality, be that of shadows, commodities or individuals. But the contribution that critical theory could make here is to point out there is currently an even more significant form of abstraction—that of 'universalism' from the experience of truth. As the products of labor are abstracted from the process of their production and fetishized as objects in-themselves; and as the products of thinking are abstracted from the process of their production in experience and fetishized as concepts in-themselves; so, the logic of the universal is abstracted from the presuppositions of its conditions of possibility and fetishized as truth in-it-

self. Property law is the presupposition of all such abstraction.² It is the logic of the legitimacy of masters and ends, and the illegitimacy of things and means.

This universalism of abstraction currently has the universalism of the social in full retreat. In the USA, a civil war beckons between the racialized identity of the forces of abstract market-freedom and the remnant of universalism that is struggling to hold to any vision of the social or universal interest. The UK (or England in particular) has rejected European cosmopolitanism. European member states face tension from reinigorated nationalism and separatism. Strongmen leaders create tyrannies and oligarchies in all continents of the globe. They practice terror through the bombing of civilians in other countries and through the suppression of protest in their own countries. And they offer role models for those who aspire to such fascistic leadership.

Another powerful and significant shape of free-market abstraction is the consciousness of the consumers who consider themselves free to choose between the providers, the networks, and the platforms which structure the knowledge they receive and communicate. Digital consumers, choosing their own ideological platforms, are encouraged to believe that their choices reflect some kind of critical consumer judgement, and constitute a rejection of the idea that there is one ideological apparatus operating in one grand interest that creates and recreates mere ideological subjects. This free-market consciousness extends beyond the digital and defines and shapes almost all political debate and much of the character of social relationships and individual identities. It is also shaping the so-called culture wars, for example, that between free speech and equal rights, and threatens the complexities of the struggle for the recognition of and protection for non-cis identities.

Abstraction also shapes the forces that oppose it. In many respects, the protests against the domination implicit in universalist claims has been empowering for the marginalized and the excluded. But abstract universality so dominates the theorizing of the universal and the pro-

2 I explore this in my book *Socrates on Trial* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

tests launched against it, that it also marginalizes and excludes any other interpretations of the universal, therein denying the struggles for inclusion and justice any appeal to universal interest. It disallows any *other* or different universality, including within the experiences that disrupt the abstract universal. As such, it denies universal significance to any critique of abstraction, including that which assigns such significance to historical collectivities. If the struggles for inclusion and justice also accept this denial and cancel all theorizing of universality, the danger is that they fall straight into the trap that abstraction has set.

Sociological consciousness of the kind found in Adorno has been a foil to the complete triumph of abstraction. This is borne out in the antagonism that the forces of abstraction have shown themselves to bear against such sociological consciousness. It knows that this consciousness challenges abstraction because it exposes the dependency of its mastery upon social formations. The British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was bold enough in 1987 to say what the free market had often been a little more cautious to express in public: 'There's no such thing as society.'³ In this version of free-market consciousness the freedom of the individual is abstracted from any dependency upon a mediating agency. The invisible hand of the market is the only regulation that such freedom would sanction, being the mechanism of each individual in pursuit of its own interests without regard for those of others, except insofar as they have needs that another individual can exploit. A recent iteration of Thatcher's view is the reaction against charges of institutional sexism and racism. If there is no such thing as society, then there can be no such thing as socialized racism or socialized sexism. There is only personal responsibility, saving institutions from any culpability in or as cultures of discrimination and persecution.

3 A fuller quotation is "They are casting their problems at society. And, you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours." – in an interview in *Women's Own* in 1987. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes>

A Kantian incentive to sociological consciousness has been the division of the experience of abstraction into the opposition of freedom and necessity. The freedom of the abstract master is opposed by its necessary dependency upon pre-existing social relations. This has been replayed in the Covid crisis. The free master has needed social institutions to provide universal medical care (in Britain, the National Health Service), to disseminate universal information (in Britain, the BBC), and to exchange universal medical research (universities). Such ‘universal institutions’ have long been and remain targets of the free-market consciousness. But the pandemic exposed the dependency of the abstract upon existing social conditions of possibility. Indeed, in the first year of the pandemic in the UK, it looked as if people’s love of the NHS in particular, and care for collective welfare in general, could revitalize the theorizing of the universal by way of a renewed sociological consciousness.

The antinomy of abstract freedoms and social necessities is not new. Aristotle defined freedom as independence (or abstraction) from the necessity for and therefore dependence upon labor, and he defined truth as independence (or abstraction) from the necessity for and therefore dependence upon the labor of mediation and its consequent contradictions. As Kant and Hegel both noted, nothing changed regarding this truth and logic from Aristotle to the eighteenth century. But their own attempts to do so could be seen to have worked in opposition to their best intentions. Out of Kant’s Copernican revolution comes the catastrophe for universalism of the post-truth age,⁴ and out of Hegel’s science of logic comes the tyranny of universal or absolute spirit. Both contributed to the conditions for the much-heralded end of metaphysics and of philosophy, but also for the end of the universalism of the sociological consciousness which, as I will demonstrate, they also helped to create.

If a retrieval of social universalism can challenge the universalism of abstract forms of consciousness by way of a retrieval of sociological consciousness, then this commends us to re-examine what sociological con-

4 See for example, Anthony Morgan (ed) *The Kantian Catastrophe* (Exeter: Short Run Press Ltd, 2017).

consciousness was, what its conditions of possibility were, and what shapes it might take in any reappearance. Adorno, one of sociological consciousness's great champions, argued that while philosophy must yield the idea that it had the Absolute at its command it need not 'bargain away anything of the emphatic concept of truth.'⁵ What, then, in the ruins of philosophical and sociological conceptuality, survives of truth and universalism for critical sociological thinking, or indeed for radical philosophy, to work with? Perhaps it is the necessity 'to provide a refuge for freedom'⁶ in full acknowledgement of the abstractions that thinking both expresses and undermines. In 'Why Still Philosophy?' Adorno said that 'Praxis, whose purpose is to produce a rational and politically mature humanity, remains under the spell of disaster unless it has a theory that can think the totality in its untruth,'⁷ or unless it can theorize the totality as false without sacrificing the universal that is retained in thinking totality falsely.

Adorno responded to Hegel's claim in the *Phenomenology* that 'The True is the whole'⁸ by stating in *Minima Moralia* that 'The whole is the false.'⁹ (#29). But the whole is not thereby dogmatically rejected. Answering the question 'why still philosophy' he ended his essay on 'Resignation' with the significance of education and learning that is carried in the experience of such a totality of untruth. 'Whatever has once been thought that can be suppressed, forgotten, can vanish. But it cannot be denied that something of it survives. For thinking has the element of the universal ... The happiness that dawns in the eye of the thinking person is the happiness of humanity. [But] The universal tendency of oppression is opposed to thought as such.'¹⁰

5 T.W. Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?' in *Critical Models* (New York: Columbia Press, 2005), 7.

6 Adorno, 'Philosophy,' 10.

7 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 14.

8 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1977), 20.

9 T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, (London: Verso, 1991), 29.

10 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 293.

Perhaps sociological consciousness carries that most elusive of Adorno's ideas, the universalism of a theory that can think the truth of the abstract totality in its untruth. A renewed theorizing of the universal would involve holding abstract universality accountable to its conditions of possibility. It would require the distinction to be made between abstract universality and the culture in which universality is formed and re-formed. Sociological consciousness has consistently challenged this domination of abstraction. It is the consciousness of the necessary presupposition of social conditions of possibility.

One way to revitalize this critical theory-style theorizing of the universal is in the universalism of this sociological consciousness by way of the antinomial experiences that characterize divisions in social and political life. I will suggest that the sociological universalism that exposes the social preconditions of abstraction is not the closed and imperial universality of abstraction. It is instead the universality that changes and learns and reforms itself. It is the non-imperial universality that might be able to speak of non-white-male versions of universality and of non-anthropocentric commonalities of life on earth and beyond it. In such culture(s) of universality the (s) is no longer held captive by the abstract domination of what can and cannot count as universal. And perhaps, counter-intuitively, we might attempt this retrieval of sociological consciousness by way of the work of someone whose relation to Adorno remained ambiguous, despite several very critical appraisals of his work. Gillian Rose has argued for Hegel *contra* sociology. I think we can find in this opposition a convincing counter-intuitive idea of Hegel *pro* sociology, retrieving in the process the significance for her of being employed in a department of sociology, not philosophy.¹¹

From the Kantian tribunal ...

In *Dialectic of Nihilism* (1984) Rose says that philosophy after Kant was superseded by social theory in response to the Kantian diremption of law and

11 *Hegel Contra Sociology* was Rose's second book—G. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981). She once talked to me of the importance for her of not losing her sociological identity to philosophy. See also n. 18 below.

ethics, itself reflecting the antinomies of philosophy's tribunal carried out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹² The antinomies of the tribunal are grounded in the propertied forms of law that the tribunal presupposes. Reason is asked to list its rightful possessions (concepts) and is also asked (conceptually) to justify its possession of them. This means that what is being investigated is also what is being employed as the means of the investigation. The tribunal looks like a put-up job because the judge, the witnesses, and the clerk of the court all presuppose the validity that is under investigation. Philosophy is marking its own homework. This presupposition of validity in examining validity shows that the tribunal must fail and will not bring about the resolution, or the peace, or the kingdom of ends, that it hopes for. It can only reproduce the anxiety that instigated the tribunal.

The antinomy of the law of the tribunal consists of antithetical claims that possession of concepts is both immediately (necessarily) valid and contractually (freely) valid. But it cannot be both. This antinomy of freedom and necessity is the failure of property to justify itself rationally, and thus exposes its legitimacy as grounded only in the force of violence. This opposition of freedom and necessity is experienced as the antinomy of Kantian law. The categorical imperative's response to the antinomy was to define freedom as having no personal ends, no interested experience at all. Pure freedom is claimed to belong to persons (or property-owning masters) for they are where duty is an end in-itself. But this only rehearses the dualism of thing and person (master) that is already and abstractly universalized in property law and experienced antinomically. As Hegel would later point out, this is only to say that 'a specific form of legality has been reproduced in the determination of form as such.'¹³

One might add here that Kant was forced to separate law and ethics because his revolution in metaphysics was not also a revolution in the experience of truth or therefore in the ancient logic of identity and non-contradiction. Aristotle had secured identity (freedom, truth, nature) in-itself against any external necessity or mediation by experience

12 I now rehearse her reading.

13 Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 20. Her words, not Hegel's.

and the philosophical tradition carried it forward as the domination of abstract validity over the activity of cognition. Kant's metaphysical revolution did not change this logic by which absolute truth was judged unknowable in-itself. It only confirmed it, despite showing that the problem lay not with the object but with the limitations of understanding that was dependent upon experience. The reason for the unknowability of truth in-itself is revolutionized but not the unknowability itself. Faced with the antinomy that truth is both necessary and necessarily unknowable, Kant tried to resolve the contradiction by neutralizing it. If the truth of experience is found in the representation of the representation of objects, then 'the contradiction vanishes.'¹⁴

While Kant does not redefine truth according to the necessity or universality of its being conditional upon experience, nevertheless he has the tool to do so in the synthetic a priori judgement. Whereas analytic judgement works simply according to the logic of abstract identity, synthetic judgement has mediation as its condition of possibility, or as its determination. But Kant does not employ the synthetic a priori for absolute truth because its mediation still offends the traditional identity of truth in-itself being unmediated.

The implications are felt in Kant's practical philosophy. The antinomy of Kantian theoretical truth is replayed in Kantian practical truth in the antinomy of law, or as freedom and necessity, and morality and legality. Freedom is the purity of interest without corruption or mediation by anything heteronomous; necessity would be just such an impurity for it would corrupt pure interest or duty with an external force or an ulterior interest or end. Necessity becomes legality while freedom becomes moral autonomy. Here the diremption of law and ethics repeats the antinomies of Kantian truth inherent in the tribunal.

Why, then, does Rose say that social theory and sociology emerge from this diremption, and indeed supersede philosophy after Kant? To explore this question requires us to re-visit her first chapter in *Hegel Contra Sociology*.

14 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007), Bxxx.

... to neo-Kantian sociology

Rose follows the path of various neo-Kantian responses to the Kantian crisis of validity, showing in the process how the diremption of law and ethics became neo-Kantian sociology. Into the abstraction of validity from experience Rudolph Hermann Lotze (1817-1881) added a third reality, that of values in order to safeguard absolute values. In Lotze's threefold model there are necessarily valid truths, immediately cognized facts of reality, and absolute values within the conscience. Values settled in the inner world of feelings and rational conscience and the outer world of ethical action (moral philosophy) while validity became a general logic, a *Geltungslogik*, a methodology of objective classification, valid because free from experience. The general logic took up the task of applying rules of identity to objects. Like validity in the tribunal, methodology is left unaccountable to and for the presuppositions of validity that it already serves. For the truth of values and validity experience (mediation, contingency) is once again the problem. Validity without experience lacks value. Values without experience lack validity. Experience is a plague on both houses. Neo-Kantianism went both ways. The Heidelberg School prioritized a transcendent realm of values, while the Marburg School prioritized a general logic of validity. 'But in both cases the transformation of Kant's critical method into a logic of validity, a general method, excluded any enquiry into empirical reality.'¹⁵

It is the condition of the possibility of values and validity within experience that marks the beginning of the superseding of philosophy by sociology. The universalism of validity and of values is determined within, and therefore also contradicted by, their being experienced. The experience of contingency is not new. But the experience of being the condition of the possibility of truth itself (the real Kantian revolution) was now the experience of freedom and necessity as the 'social' antinomy of law (validity) and ethics (values). Freedom and necessity were now a social

15 Rose, *Hegel*, 9.

experience because the unknowability of truth in-itself was a social experience. And this social experience was the consciousness of being the condition of possibility (the practical antinomy of law and ethics) that philosophical truth necessarily presupposes. It would be incorrect to see this as just the transition of practical philosophy into sociology because practical philosophy already carried the antinomies of the tribunal. The social accounts for the failure of the tribunal and begins the end of philosophy. This new social experience was a consciousness that named itself sociology.

But sociological consciousness is different from the abstractions of neo-Kantian sociologies. It is the consciousness that presupposes the conditions of its possibility. It is also abstracted from those conditions and has them an object of its experience. In keeping with the crisis of validity and values that it expresses, the transition 'from Kantian epistemology to neo-Kantian sociology'¹⁶ was played out in the dualism of structural and action sociology. Sociology as a form of universal consciousness is itself dominated by the way its universalism merely pervades 'our common sense as oppositions.'¹⁷ Such sociological universalism could have been found in the 'highest principle of all synthetic judgements,'¹⁸ for it was the antinomy of truth known as its experience. It could have re-defined philosophical experience. Sociological consciousness was the consciousness of being the condition of the possibility of experience in general, and the condition of the possibility of the objects of experience. But this social condition of the possibility of philosophy, in keeping with the logic of mastery, sought independence for itself as the science of society, and reduced philosophy to merely abstract conceptualization, empty if avoiding the social condition of its possibility.

In sociology's struggle for identity Rose argues that Durkheim prioritized validity over values and Weber prioritized values over validity, thus abstracting sociology from its own sociological consciousness.

16 Rose, *Hegel*, 6.

17 Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992), xii.

18 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 158/ B 197.

Durkheim sought to resolve the antinomy of law by moral facts while Weber did so by means of legitimacy. For Durkheim, society was the necessary precondition of social facts just as for Kant God had been a necessary precondition for truth. Durkheim then turned this transcendental necessity of society *sui generis* into a general logic, and into rules of method, regarding social and moral facts. This became the method of moral education and his version of the sociological consciousness in his lectures at the Sorbonne in 1902-3. The antinomies in these lectures between freedom and necessity exist within the sociological consciousness of his idea of moral education.

Weber repeated the same task in reverse, arguing that values *sui generis* conferred validity. Since there is no access to empirical reality that is not already a value, the validity of values is a matter of faith. This raised the specter of the warring gods in society, a relativistic chaos of incommensurable facts and values. In response, and like Durkheim, Weber makes what Rose calls a Kantian turn against the neo-Kantians that simply separates validity and values. His ideal-type serves as empirical reality for the purpose of measurement and comparison. But since there can be no access to such reality without values, the measuring is invalid. He sought to resolve this with a notion of objective possibility as a regulative (but not a constitutive) principle to make sense of the antinomic (legal) challenge of valid value-based social life. The cost of Weber's Kantian turn is the importing of means-end rationality (and therein the rationality of the Protestant ethic) so that values can become goals and categorized (or naturalized) into the typology of legitimate orders.

Sociological consciousness, then, is Kantian in being the synthesis of the (social) conditions of the tribunal, and is neo-Kantian as a discipline that, having the social as the object of its study, continues to separate validity from experience as its methodology. Where, then, did sociology experience its own sociological consciousness as a shape of the antinomical thinking of freedom and necessity? Where did it think itself as the consciousness of the presupposition of social preconditions? Where did it become self-conscious as the antinomical experience of logic and prop-

erty law? The possessive 'of', for example, in the sociology of education, or the sociology of the family, etc., suggests that it rather enjoyed its meta-status as their condition of possibility. But as Rose notes, the sociology of knowledge was a special case. Here Kantian epistemology turned into consciousness of itself as subject and object.¹⁹ It is where the social condition becomes the consciousness of necessity. Its universalism challenged the universalism of its abstraction with the necessity of its being socially determined. Abstraction cannot survive this kind of dependency unscathed, including the abstraction of social pre-condition into a *social or structural domination* of its experience or its sociological consciousness. Sociology was unpopular with the free-market consciousness, *and* with totalitarian consciousness, because it was the experience of the mediation of their abstract forms of domination. And the sociology of knowledge was unpopular in sociology because it subjected all sociology to mediation by itself. It left no abstraction unchallenged.

As such, sociological consciousness was left wrestling with its own significance as some kind of perspective on the 'totality'. Individuals had the conditions of their possibility in society. Identities were socially constructed. Upbringing was socialization. Truth was relative to social context. The import of this totality of perspective depended upon the character assigned to the totality. Seen as a machine, or as a mechanism of social life, it functioned to make sure all the right parts were in the right place. Seen as a mechanism of the free flow of capital, based on the exploitation and alienation of labor, it functioned as the ideological machine of the ruling class. As Peter Osborne has noted, 'Marx is an elusive presence in Rose's writing.'²⁰ Her critique of Marxist sociology is that it too is the antinomical consciousness of the separation of validity and experience. But she suggests that, because Marxism has no sense of itself as a culture, it cannot experience its own reformations within

19 I base this sentence on one of Rose's MA course outlines on the sociology of knowledge from Sussex University, UK, in 1986. In conversation she described this development as 'the sociology of sociology'.

20 Peter Osborne, 'Gillian Rose and Marxism' *Telos* 173 (Winter, 2015), 60.

property relations, and instead holds on to the validity of a theory of objective social relations. For Osborne it was just such objective theory that made possible the transformations of the subject-object relation in capitalist relations that Rose's critical sociological Marxism could know immanently but not transform materially. It fell to the critical sociology of the Frankfurt School in particular, to retrieve and to develop sociological consciousness, including the social pre-conditions that abstracted the universal class from its universal consciousness. For Adorno, at least, this expressed 'a theory that can think the totality in its untruth.'²¹

Rose notes the development of other metacritiques which often rejected the privileging of consciousness within Kantian epistemology and neo-Kantian sociology, in attempts to avoid its inherent contradictions. Distrustful of the role played by experience in the tribunal and blaming reason for its own self-defeating practical presuppositions, these metacritiques did not accept the social as the precondition of valid cognition. They returned to the question of validity by seeking to identify different pre-conditions. These presuppositions of pre-conditions varied, but Rose grouped them under the title of new ontologies. She lists these presuppositions of pre-conditions as 'life' (Dilthey), 'social-situation' (Mannheim), *Dasein* (Heidegger) and 'history' (Gadamer). One might add 'communicative action' (Habermas), 'structuration' (Giddens), alongside *différance* (Derrida), power (Foucault) and repetition (Deleuze). Each of these seeks conditions of possibility different from the tyrannies of the now exposed empire of rational consciousness. But for Rose, a specific form of legality

21 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 14. For Osborne it was further evidence that Rose's critical Marxism as a whole 'represents the end-point of modern philosophy; a point at which the self-critique of epistemology has reached its limit, and from which it can progress no further, condemned to eternal repetition, the never-ending production of a speculative experience of society which remains trapped within the confines of the perspective it knows to be false. For through her critical reading of Hegel, Rose has arrived at just that point at which Adorno, whose path was more tortuous, came to rest: recognition of the fact that the essential negativity of the dialectic of consciousness means that it can have no resting place, can secure no 'true' knowledge' (Peter Osborne. 'Hegelian Phenomenology and the Critique of Reason and Society', *Radical Philosophy* 32, 1982, 14-15). Note here that Jay Bernstein reported that at a restaurant Rose once confided to her students that 'she couldn't distinguish her own thought and Adorno's' (J. M. Bernstein, "A Work of Hard Love," *The Guardian* (UK), December 11, 1995).

has been reproduced in the determination of these new ontologies. As such, they offered only new abstractions and therefore new dominations of the sociological consciousness. The forms of legality that these new philosophies carried but denied, and practiced but masked, moved Rose to write *Dialectic of Nihilism* and led thereafter to her own critique of the new wave of such philosophies.

The decline of sociological consciousness

If, as Osborne observed, *Hegel Contra Sociology* confirmed the exhaustion of philosophy, there is a sense in which *Dialectic of Nihilism* registered the decline of sociological consciousness.²² Jean Hyppolite's influential reading of Hegel in the mid-20th century plays an important part here. In *Logic and Existence* he argued that Hegel privileged thought over everything else, calling the totality of thought the Absolute because it colonised everything, leaving nothing un-thought or absolutely other. The imperialism is grounded in Hegel's claim that the Absolute becomes other to itself only so that it can claim to be all otherness. How, then, to oppose this imperialism without becoming part of its total culture? Hyppolite, and then much post-structural thought after him, sought an otherness that exceeded Hegel's Absolute, one which it cannot colonise, and a radical openness that it cannot close. This was found in doubling, or as difference. Difference, it is argued, is not opposition. Difference is this *and* another. It is not this *or* another. It is not contradiction. Equally, difference is not part of the totality of absolute thought. Difference pre-exists absolute thought. The Absolute needs difference, but difference does not need the Absolute. Difference pre-exists the Absolute because the 'and' in one thing *and* another thing, pre-exists the 'or' in one thing *or* another thing. The 'and' is a different difference to the otherness claimed by the Absolute. The 'and' is difference *as* difference.

If sociological consciousness is the necessary totality of social determination, then Hyppolite's recovery of what is un-thought by this con-

22 But not the end of sociology as an academic discipline, which learns to adapt to life without its so-called grand narratives.

consciousness marks the beginning of the end of sociological consciousness. It is partly to the political significance of this that Rose draws attention in much of her work. When the new ontologies claim to have avoided the tyrannies of reason, they have masked their reproduction of the categories of property law. They generally rest on the claim to have avoided the pretensions to totality of the sociological consciousness. But for Rose, the inevitable neo-Kantian antinomies of such 'postmodern' thought at once reveals its own formation within property relations. So, for example, in *The Broken Middle* Rose takes up the challenge of postmodern attitudes that announce the end of philosophy, the end of metaphysics, and perhaps also now, the end of sociological consciousness. The rejection of the perceived sovereignty of conceptualization, she says, has emboldened the postmodern judges to renounce law and logos in the names of discourse, pluralism and 'the Other'. But this renunciation, and the celebrations of the end of Western metaphysics, might be a little overhasty. These critiques of universalism/concept display the same disjunctions of law, the same antinomies, as those found in Kant's practical law, disjunctions within which postmodernity 'disallows itself any conceptuality or means of comprehension for investigating its own implication and configuration.'²³ This is because postmodern thinking suppresses the process of conceptuality with violent singularities that rip the history and determination out of experience and treats the latter as almost messianic events or happenings.²⁴ But to suppress the determination of singularity within the sociological experience is to suppress precisely the disjunctions that condition the appearance of the singular. Postmodernity, and with it the celebrated end of philosophy, and now also of sociology, reproduces the Kantian antinomy of law but does so with intrigue regarding the violence of its subterfuge. The result is that postmodernity became a 'triumphant ecclesiology' and a 'sociality of saints'.²⁵ These sin-

23 Rose, *Broken Middle*, xii.

24 For example, Agamben's 'time that remains' is the claim to a time that avoids implication in and configuration by the law. See G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005).

25 Rose, *Broken Middle*, xiii.

gular immediacies, which hold themselves immune to the antinomies of law by declaring themselves not determined within the universalities of law, then seek only to justify new laws, new violence, in the name of authenticity; and here authenticity means authentically undetermined and unconditioned by, or free from and immune to, conceptual determination, or social determination, or universal presupposition; and one might add, free from the question of freedom. Even if the rejection of universalism did not aim to give property relations a new shape of intrigue, property relations nevertheless operate in the rejection of universalism.

If property relations are to be rendered visible as the shape of all cognition of truth and freedom, then perhaps a renewed universalism, a renewed sociological consciousness, and a renewed understanding of the experience of the necessity of social condition, are going to be required to meet this challenge. The exposure of the continued domination of propertied universalism cannot be realized by the shape of consciousness as (propertied) difference. It is a universal consciousness that can know its own universal determination in and by universal property relations and is therein equipped to know universality differently than as abstraction demands. This was at the heart of Rose's project for a critical and cultural Marxism in *Hegel Contra Sociology* and beyond.

So how did Rose describe her own Hegelian philosophical project to negotiate the sociological experience of a totality that is nevertheless false? Her disappointment with Adorno was that his negative dialectics was a morality of method; not a general logic of objectifications but an infinite task to preserve the sociological consciousness from total assimilation into the totality that it nevertheless clearly understands. This is Adorno's non-standpoint, or non-identity, his conviction of totality of being non-identical with itself. But it is also the limitation of the sociological consciousness in relation to a Marxism that seeks to transform the objective social determinations of material relations. In the face of the limitations of the universalism of non-identity one can fall to resignation by demanding abstract solutions and actions, or by rejecting sociological consciousness altogether as unable to transform the conditions of its own possibility.

In her earliest book Rose notes that these limitations raise the question of whether critical sociology is even possible given its self-defeating rationality. In the *Hegel* book she responds to this by invoking a 'speculative sociology'²⁶ that can retrieve the absolute within the thinking of social relations. In the light of her future work, this speculative sociology is the sociological consciousness of the diremption of law and ethics, carrying the universalism of the experience of its own necessity in social conditions of possibility. The change in thinking that this commends is a different kind of universalism to that of the abstract logic of identity. It commends 'a unity of theory and practice'²⁷ and a 'different way of transforming ... unfreedom.'²⁸ Her later work rehearses this different universalism across a variety of themes, but always with a view to uncovering the suppression of the consciousness that knows the suppression of its own critical universalism. From the *Hegel* book, her idea of the sociological consciousness is described in the following way:

Once it is shown that the criterion of what is to count as finite and infinite has been created by consciousness itself, then a notion is implied which does not divide consciousness or reality into finite and infinite. This notion is implied by the very distinction between finite and infinite which has become uncertain. But it is not pre-judged as to what this notion, beyond the distinction between finite and infinite, might be. It is not pre-judged in two senses: no autonomous justification is given of a new object, and no statement is made before it is achieved. The infinite or absolute is present, but not yet known, neither treated methodologically from the outside as an unknowable, nor "shot from a pistol" as an immediate certainty. This "whole" can only become known as a result of the process of the contradictory experiences of consciousness which gradually comes to realize it.²⁹

26 Rose, *Hegel*, 32.

27 Rose, *Hegel*, 51.

28 Rose, *Hegel*, 201.

29 Rose, *Hegel*, 46.

The central parts of *Hegel Contra Sociology* work through the determinate negation of subjective substance as this educational process. This is what now looks so ‘quixotic’³⁰ in an age when the whole, or subjective substance, is clearly linked to the evils of sexist, colonial and racist views in Kant and Hegel. But perhaps there is also a different kind of universalism accompanying these stereotypes that pervaded the ‘scientific’ hierarchy of the great chain of being and the philosophy of history, one that does not define truth in abstractions of totality, exclusivity and closure.

Hegel *pro* sociology

Osborne notes that Rose saw the importance of the value-form in Adorno, and that she saw Hegel’s ‘logic of illusion’ behind the idea that value subtracts the individual from social labor and appears ‘only in the illusorily self-sufficient form of monetary relations (“money”).’³¹ But Osborne interprets illusion in Rose in terms of recognition and misrecognition, and notes that these are insufficient for transformation of material being. This, he says, illustrates precisely ‘the social-epistemological bias of a wholly phenomenological ethical Hegelianism’³² that not only haunts Rose’s oeuvre but also much of the work of Rose’s supporters. As such, radical philosophy ‘needs’ (his word) a ‘social correlate of Heidegger’s concept of *immanent transcendence*’³³ that is not reducible to experience. This ‘need,’ conditional upon the separation of cognition and validity, hopes to avoid the antinomies of freedom and necessity in which it is nevertheless implicated. But as twentieth-century European history demonstrated, immanent transcendence has sought validity in immediacies of authenticity and futurity that are held to be unaccountable to conditions of possibility that are not already asserted as authentic and futural. One should be dubious that any jargon of authenticity will offer that which Osborne seeks, namely, ‘the horizon of historical intelligibil-

30 Osborne, *Rose and Marxism*, 55.

31 Osborne, *Rose and Marxism*, 62.

32 Osborne, *Rose and Marxism*, 62.

33 Osborne, *Rose and Marxism*, 63.

ity' that frames the 'critique of political economy with the social history of capitalism, in its nation-state and globally transnational forms.'³⁴ More likely any impatient desire for an immediacy of identity different from that created in the antinomical mastery of reason,³⁵ will continue to extinguish the sociological consciousness of social pre-condition, something which, as we see, all-too-easily becomes license for new forms of law and new forms of violence that replace the question of freedom with the demands of compliance.

In a different reading of Hegel's logic of illusion to that of Osborne, one might find not just Hegel *contra* neo-Kantian sociology, but also Hegel *pro* an Adorno-style sociological consciousness. Rose does not speak much of illusory being in her *Hegel* book. Nevertheless, the logic of illusory being is the logic not just of her Hegelian critique of neo-Kantian sociology, but also of her Hegelian reconstruction of critical sociology into something like a speculative sociological consciousness. Illusion for Rose is actual in the Hegel that is *contra* sociology. Perhaps the illusion of the totality, and of universalism, is also the Hegel that is *pro* sociological consciousness, and crucial in the struggle against the domination of abstraction and the retrieval of its social conditions of possibility.

In the second Preface to the *Science of Logic* Hegel reminds us that the essence of things is the work or mediation of thought. He shrugs off Kant's unknowable thing-in-itself, or essence, as only 'the so-called thing-in-itself of empty abstraction.'³⁶ For Hegel, being and essence are thought's presupposition of itself. As such, its truth and logic are forever without abstract grounding or universality. But rather than being the tautological presupposition that motivates the desire for immanent transcendence, Hegel finds a logic of illusion whose truth is this contin-

34 Osborne, *Rose and Marxism*, 63.

35 I am not saying that Osborne shares this impatience.

36 GWF Hegel, *Science of Logic* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), 36. Perhaps Kant's reply to Hegel would be that logic itself 'teaches us nothing whatsoever about the content of knowledge' (CPR, A61/ B 86), and that Hegel's pretensions to make logic a substantive content is just so much 'logic of illusion' (A 61/ B 86). And perhaps Hegel's reply to Kant would be that this is only the case if he presupposes, methodologically, the separation of validity and experience.

gency within presupposition. This makes it incompatible with a logic of abstraction but fertile for renewed notions of the universal interest in social life.

If the highest principle of Kant's synthetic a priori judgement is the positing of the conditions of the possibility of experience in the experience of that positing, then this is a principle of the necessity that is already actual precondition. It was Hegel rather than Kant who took up the challenge of thinking the truth of synthetic judgement, or who conducted the tribunal of the illusions of the tribunal. The truth of this second tribunal is the logic of essence as illusory being. Hegel's illusory being is the path that the tribunal of Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy, and neo-Kantian sociology, eschewed. But it is the path and the logic that gives sociological consciousness its own social substance, or universalism.

What is illusory being? On one level, it is a (non-Aristotelian) logic of recollection in which presupposition is a non-linear logic of cause and effect. That which is recollected is already posited, and that which is posited has also determined the recollection. Here is the same circular structure of Kant's synthetic a priori judgements in which 'thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.'³⁷ This applies as much to the object of recollection as to recollection that becomes its own object. It is a whirlwind of instability, something that Žižek makes great play of. There is no objective event to recollect, and there is no objective event of recollection.

Essence is the illusion that this is a logic of reflection, where the particular is returned to the whole. The illusion is the reflective shape taken by presupposition. In reflection a mirror reflects back the (external) part to the whole or the essence. But in illusory being there is no original figure that the mirror reflects. Instead, illusory being is as two mirrors facing each other, neither of which is the essence of the other. As such, essence is only illusory being. It is 'essentially the presupposing of that from which

37 Kant, *Pure Reason*, A51/ B75.

it is the return³⁸ or 'the movement of nothing to nothing.'³⁹ For the certainty that is housed in and offered by abstraction this simply does not count as an identity or a truth. It is merely an empty infinite regression that because it is inherently self-contradictory is otiose. But for a logic in which presupposition can, and necessarily already has, shown itself, a new science of logic announces itself. It is a logic of the illusion present in knowing the conditions of the possibility of illusion. Or, again, it is a logic of conditions of possibility becoming their own experience. As a logic of presupposition being its own self-consciousness, it is therefore also the logic of sociological consciousness.

Sociological consciousness knows the antinomies of law as society and the individual, or as social determination (necessity) and autonomy (freedom). Sociology can exhaust itself in the reflective infinite regression of the illusions of society and the individual. But sociology does not exhaust itself when its sociological consciousness is social substance, or self-determining presupposition of social conditions of possibility. It is not a reproduction of the abstract universal of mastery. It is an experience of the universalism of the self-destruction of such mastery. It is a different social relation. And it presages a different kind of communal life, but still one that can be violently suppressed by refusing the experience of the illusions of the totality of social substance, or more simply, by removing every possibility of an education for and the development of sociological consciousness. Social substance or the actuality of social conditions of possibility, is where Hegel, *contra* neo-Kantian sociology, can be called on as *pro* sociological consciousness, offering a new conception of universal or social life.

Moreover, if Hegel's logic of illusion anticipates the sociological consciousness, it is also able to demonstrate the illusions of recent shapes of abstract free-market consciousness including the shapes of experience (universal, particular and singular) that critique them. As has been discussed, *abstract universalities* are the totalities of empire, gender or race

38 Hegel, *Logic*, 401.

39 Hegel, *Logic*, 400.

or anthropocentric hierarchies, authoritarianism, and capital. This is the universalism that claims possession of everything for itself and disqualifies any beyond or excess or otherness outside of its controlling classification. Critique of such exclusivity that appeals to pluralism and local self-definition claims possession of nothing except itself, giving sovereignty to difference and heterogeneity. There is also the *abstract particularity* of sovereign reflection detached from universality altogether, while *abstract singularity* claims detachment from universality and particularity. Being neither totalitarian nor pluralist, it is messianic, wholly other to any determining narrative, grand or otherwise. It is variously an excess, a remainder, or a remnant, one that never coincides with itself. It is an event beyond worldly events.

The abstractions of universal, particular and singular absorb the sociological consciousness. As such, social determination is totalitarian if it is universal, nugatory if it is particular, and neither social nor determinative for the messianic singularity. Under this domination by abstraction sociological consciousness is either over-determination, under-determination, or non-determination, and it is unthinkable as a critique of abstraction, or as the thinking of the antinomy of property law.

Retrieving universalism in 'identity'

Faced with such domination of abstraction philosophy often prefers to yield universalism altogether rather than seek to retrieve philosophy's sociological consciousness. Rose did not like the term postmodern, but it was a convenient shorthand for her to describe the dissolving of sociological consciousness. Yet the consciousness continues to commend itself wherever freedom and necessity clash. For example, again around Covid, abstract freedom demanded no legal impositions, while necessity required universal protections from such (often openly violent) abstractions. Both are represented at the tribunal, and both fail to secure outright victory. Similarly, one of the so-called culture wars that presently characterize social life is that between the freedom of speech and equal rights to protection from prejudice, discrimination and persecution. The demand

of abstract freedom that it be able to say whatever it wishes to whom-ever it wishes about whatever it wishes, runs counter to the universal protection of people from abuse and hatred for what they are or how they define themselves. The consciousness that the free-market currently seeks as its actuality is that which recognizes no necessity, no society and no universality. It is perhaps more powerful as a form of consciousness in the USA than for many decades. The privately owned gun is the actuality of the privately defined master whose thinking is abstracted from everything. The USA is currently facing the possibility of the triumph of the abstract in ways that will change the social dramatically.

Identity politics, the politics of difference, carries much of the weight of current radical philosophy, challenging and resisting the power and prejudice of white male political power. It stands against the prejudices and persecutions of identities that are still judged within modern versions of the great chain of being. But if such philosophy has no concept of the universal interest within the totality that is false, then as Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment made clear, it can only challenge the domination of particular interests with other particular interests.

It is perhaps the sociological consciousness of the kind found previously in critical theory that can place the question of identity back into the ambiguities of its social conditions of possibility and retrieve a more comprehensive picture of how the concept of identity carries presuppositions of property law that condemn it to interminable contradictions regarding definition and fluidity. Indeed, this might well be its most potent form of activism, for what the abstract master fears at its deepest level is that its own lack of certainty, the vulnerability of its identity to the conditions of its possibility, and its consequent failure in the rational tribunal to prove anything except its own violence, will be exposed to its truth in social determination, or as the sociological consciousness. This is why the master acts so violently not only against the fluidity of identity, but also against everything that smacks of social determination.

Identity politics, if it is to protect itself from the subterfuges of free-market freedoms, could retrieve the social determination of identity

in a sociological consciousness that can carry the equivocality of identity—its fluidity in a culture of universality—as a different universalism to that of the rhetoric of abstract choice. This does not mean that all identities should not seek legal recognition. Far from it. People need universal legal protection from the abstract freedoms that dominate and persecute them, just as they need universal rights to choose to live in their own bodies. But it requires further vigilance to ensure that such abstract legality does not, once again, dissolve the antinomical experiences of freedom and necessity that offer identity politics the universality of its sociological consciousness. Without the conception of the universal, in the presupposition of social conditions of possibility, philosophy is all-too easily led away from the social substance of freedom and into a jargon of authenticity alongside an abstract and un-sociological notion of merely individualised self-definition. Rose makes the following telling observation from Weber. The ‘increase in individual rights in modern societies may be accompanied by an increase—not a decrease—in domination.’⁴⁰ Without the experience of social substance in sociological consciousness, there is no universality, or even a concept of collective interests, to challenge this increase.

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40 Gillian Rose, ‘Jewish Ethics and the Crisis of Philosophy’ in *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy*, edited by Emil L. Fackenheim and Raphael Jose (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 168.

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A Critique of Critique. On the semantic erosion of a concept¹

Wolfert von Rahden²

Abstract: The recent history of the concept of critique shows various distortions and ruptures, shifts and drifts. Since the Enlightenment, the *practical* concept of critique increasingly eroded. First, this is because the term was often used as a mere fashionable *epitheton ornans*, and so slid off in semantic arbitrariness and vagueness. Second, the term was discredited in a political context when it was usurped as a militant and tactical instrument of power, e.g. by Stalin's "self-criticism-" and Mao's "mass-criticism-campaigns". The *theoretical* and *epistemic* concept of critique avoided this reduction, but it also led to fundamental controversies, since a consensus on uniform or majority-accepted criteria of critique did not exist and could not be reached, for example within the different discourses in the environment of the Frankfurt School (cf. the "Positivism Controversy in German sociology", the debate between Habermas and Luhmann, or the discussion on the "finalization of science"). Despite these obvious difficulties with the concept of critique, the paper argues in favor of reflecting on its analytical and normative power, which recalls the tradition of Enlightenment.

Kant, Schleiermacher, Marx

Moses Mendelssohn called the force of the Kantian critique "all-crushing" ("alles zermalmend")³, and it still plunged Kleist

- 1 This Paper was published first in German: „Kritik der Kritik. Zur Entleerung eines Begriffs“, in: *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte: H wie Habermas*, vol. XV/3 (autumn 2021), pp. 137-141.
- 2 Wolfert v. Rahden is founding managing editor of *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*. He was editor-in-chief of *Gegenworte* and *Debatte*, both published by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. He taught linguistics at the Free University Berlin and was vice-director of the *Einstein Forum Potsdam*. He was engaged in the edition of Nietzsche's last notebooks (Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari eds., KGW IX, 3 vols., 2001) and co-edited among others *Konsequenzen kritischer Wissenschaftstheorie* (1978/2011), *Theorien vom Ursprung der Sprache*, 2 vols. (1989/2010), *Die andere Kraft. Zur Renaissance des Bösen* (1993/2018), and *Forum Interdisziplinäre Begriffsgeschichte* (vol. IX/1, 2020; online-journal).
- 3 Moses Mendelssohn: „Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Dasein Gottes. Vorberichte“ [1785], in: *Schriften über Religion und Aufklärung*, ed. and

into an existential crisis.⁴ The sagacity of his critique of reason marked an epistemological turning point in the late Enlightenment. Of Kant's three "Critiques", it was primarily the *Critique of Pure Reason* that triggered an intellectual scandal among many contemporaries, since it not only called into question a supposedly secure knowledge of reality, but also brought down the architecture of traditional proofs of God's existence. Even if Kant later, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, discreetly invited God back into his theoretical building as a postulate of practical reason, having previously thrown him out the front door – this hardly lessened the shock.

As Romantic irony also appropriated the concept for itself, it lacked "logical punctuality in the determination of concepts", to take up a reproachful word of Kant addressed to Herder⁵; for a formative current of Romanticism favored an understanding of critique in which the concept frequently got lost through metaphorical delimitation ("everything is irony, everything is critique"). However, this condemnation explicitly does not apply to Schleiermacher who, with his draft of a text-criticism, developed the philological method of text interpretation which decisively contributed to establishing a critical-hermeneutical paradigm of readings.⁶ Yet, on the intellectual horizon, the outline of the next "all-crushing" critique was already emerging. Marx's critique of political economy shifted the target of critique in order to sharpen the term and to provide fundamental criticism of capitalist relations of production. The target of critique were now economic and material conditions as foundation of a historical social formation, but not the "superstructure". This new target

introduced by Martina Thom, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1989, p. 469.

- 4 Cf. Kristina Fink: *Die sogenannte „Kantkrise“ Heinrich von Kleists. Ein altes Problem aus neuer Sicht*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2012.
- 5 In this sense in his critical review of Herder's ideas in: „[Immanuel Kant:] Johann Gottfried Herder; Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit. Erster Teil“ [1785], in: Kant: *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, ed. by Wilhelm Weischedel, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1968, vol. XII, pp. 781-794, here: p. 781.
- 6 Cf. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher: *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. by Manfred Frank, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1977.

of critique devalued the philological “critical critique”,⁷ which, as a mere appendage of a surface phenomenon, was no longer taken seriously from Marx’s point of view (and led to the critique of this weapon).

Stalin and Mao

The political perversion of the practical concept of critique began with Marxism-Leninism, administered ideologically by Stalin and then by Mao. Stalin’s waves of purges against his inner-party opponents led to degrading “self-criticism” rituals in the Moscow show trials (which, however, did not save the lives of those affected in most cases).⁸ Finally, Maoism not only used the “self-criticism” strategy as an instrument of rule, but also expanded the repertoire of criticism in the phase of the Chinese “Cultural Revolution” through supposedly revolutionary “mass criticism” campaigns, which also served primarily to eliminate (“liquidate”) political opponents. The formula of criticism was: “struggle – criticism – transformation”.

A formerly differentiated theoretical concept had sunk into the lowlands of crude political party and mass practice. Only the party and its “great helmsman” were to remain immune to criticism, for the concept of criticism here fulfilled purely power-tactical functions.⁹

Critical Theory and Critical Rationalism

In the meantime, the term retained its profile as a criterion for scientific paradigms in the epistemic tradition and especially within philosophy and the sciences.¹⁰ In the context of the post-war intellectual history of

7 Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx: *Die heilige Familie, oder Kritik der kritischen Kritik*, Frankfurt/M.: Literarische Anstalt (J. Rütten) 1845; the writing was directed against the Young Hegelian Bruno Bauer and „Consorten“.

8 See in more detail Karl Schlögel: *Terror und Traum: Moskau 1937*, Munich: Hanser 2008; *Moscow 1937*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2012.

9 On this in detail Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer: *Mao Zedong. „Es wird Kampf geben“: Eine Biographie*, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz 2017.

10 Cf. Ernst Müller and Falko Schmieder: *Begriffsgeschichte und historische Se-*

the Federal Republic of Germany, two theories confronted each other in the late sixties: “critical rationalism” and “critical theory”. The two theoretical approaches introduced the addition of “critical” as a distinct brand in their self-description. Their confrontation crystallized at about the same time as the strategic Maoist devaluation of the critique topos reached its peak.¹¹ In the “Positivism Controversy”, the main representatives of both positions were engaged in a heated debate in which the different conceptions of critique became clear: Karl R. Popper versus Theodor W. Adorno, Hans Albert versus Jürgen Habermas.¹² Both theories claimed (like Kant’s epistemology) to argue critically in the name of reason. Popper anchored his concept of reason in empiricism, wanted to achieve progress in knowledge by experimentation along the rationalistic-deductive lines of “trial-and-error” using a strictly scientific method, the so-called fallibilism.¹³ Especially the “dialectical method” of Critical Theory (“Dialectic of Enlightenment”, “Negative Dialectics”) as a “Hegelian-Marxist legacy” was rejected by the representatives of Critical Rationalism as irrational, contradictory and unscientific. Habermas,

mantik. Ein kritisches Kompendium, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2016.

- 11 In the context of the post-war French intellectual history almost contemporaneously Sartre’s concept of critique triggered different controversial marxist, existentialist and phenomenological argumentations which overlapped each other, later on followed by structuralistic and post-structuralistic discourses. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre: *Critique de la raison dialectique. Théorie des ensembles pratique, précédé de questions de méthode* [1959], Paris: Gallimard 1960. As for the controversies on philosophical postmodernism, cf. Daniel-Pascal Zorn: *Die Krise des Absoluten – was die Postmoderne hätte sein können*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2022; for Althusser and Foucault in the tradition of Gaston Bachelard’s *épistémologie* cf. Wolfert v. Rahden: «Epistémologie und Wissenschaftskritik», in: Christoph Hubig and Wolfert v. Rahden (eds.): *Konsequenzen kritischer Wissenschaftstheorie*, Berlin, New York: de Gruyter 1978/2011, pp. 162-186 (For helpful annotations to the French discussion I thank Manfred Frank).
- 12 *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*. With contributions by Theodor W. Adorno, Ralf Dahrendorf, Harald Pilot, Hans Albert, Jürgen Habermas, and Karl R. Popper, Neuwied, Berlin: Luchterhand 1969.
- 13 Karl R. Popper: *Logik der Forschung. Zur Erkenntnistheorie der modernen Naturwissenschaft*, Vienna: Springer 1935; *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge 1959.

on the other hand, criticized that Critical Rationalism did not include the social conditions of production for scientific action. He attacked the decisionism of a “rationalistically halved” reason in Critical Rationalism, which focused only on the internal scientific acquisition of knowledge and did not subject its social preconditions and the utilization of its results to the judgment of reason. The “epistemic interests” (Habermas)¹⁴ of research and science and the utilization of scientific-technical results should not be left exclusively to private discretion, i.e. to the ethos of the individual scientist or to capitalist profit interests. Against a purely rational “instrumental reason” (Horkheimer)¹⁵, a “communicative reason” must be brought to bear in discourse, Habermas argued. Critical rationalism lacks all this.

Discourse theory versus systems theory

A shift in the discussion took place in the social technology debate between Habermas and Luhmann, in which systems theory entered in competition with discourse theory, which had armed itself with the theory of communicative competence as a “counterfactual” instance of criticism. The term “counterfactual” in the sense of “normative and communicatively assumed, against mere facticity” is not to be confused with the epistemologically rightly discredited term “post-factual” (in the sense of “post truth”), which – in contrast to discourse theory – dismisses as superfluous and irrelevant the question of truth invoked to establish facticity. Whereas systems theory largely abandoned the concept of critique, since it views systems and subsystems descriptively and, at most, tacitly presupposes the functioning or self-preservation of a system prescriptively or normatively, Habermas completes his critical normative communication concept by differentiating the truth claims: He nuances the

14 Jürgen Habermas: *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1968; *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1971.

15 Cf. Max Horkheimer: *Eclipse of Reason*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press 1947; *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft*, Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer 1967.

truth postulate as criterion of critique processes according to the object area of the statements (nature or society) as well as the speaker intention. The criterion differs across three frames: In the *natural frame* it is placed under the criterion of the “truth” of the statements, in the *social frame*¹⁶ under that of the “correctness” of the rules and in the *intentional frame* under the criterion of the “sincerity” or “truthfulness” of the speaker intention. In the distinction of the subject areas, the Kantian heritage of the double implicit critical questioning still shows up – on the one hand as theoretical-epistemic (What can we know?), on the other hand as practical-ethical (What shall we do?). Consensual truth-finding – read: problem-solving – must then, according to Habermas, take place interactively in communicative discourse (i.e., in the dialogical negotiation process of critique and counter-critique).¹⁷

A science-theoretical offshoot of these debates can still be found in the controversy over the “finalization of science”, which the “Starnberg School” (a research group led by Carl Friedrich v. Weizsäcker and by Habermas) fought out against its opponents.¹⁸ Here, the primary issue was the freedom of research and science in confrontation with their social relevance and control (“finalization”). Incidentally, the category of critique in the name of reason was later revered by Peter Sloterdijk with his voluminous *Critique of Cynical Reason*.¹⁹ These thinkers still posed the question to which the concept of critique could be a legitimate answer.

However different the positions argued, in principle all thinkers who saw themselves in the tradition of the Enlightenment were united by the view that critique was indispensable as a weapon of reason. On the oth-

16 I follow the concept of frame developed by Goffman; cf. Erving Goffman: *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press 1974.

17 Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann: *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie?*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1971.

18 Cf. Hubig and v. Rahden (eds.): *Konsequenzen kritischer Wissenschaftstheorie*.

19 Peter Sloterdijk: *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, 2 vols., Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1983; *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. by Michael Eldred, foreword by Andreas Huyssen, Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press 1988.

er hand, as the assumptions about which criteria were reasonable and which criticism was constructive or destructive in the sense of reason became increasingly divergent, the argumentative consensus and persuasive power of the “weapon of critique” was lost. Instead it tended to deepen dissent or create confusion. Especially in the wake of the new media, the tendency grew to pass off the formulation of the problem – what does critique actually mean? – as its solution: The adjective “critical” visibly degenerated into a mere *epitheton ornans*, a label for arbitrarily interchangeable positions.

Aesthetic theory: Adorno

Adorno’s critique was directed at the “late capitalist system” and its “compulsion of identity” (“Identitätszwang”), against which he wanted to save the “non-identical” of consciousness as a critical instance of objection. But since thinking “ever already” (“je schon”) falls into the trap of the general system by using the contaminated linguistic system, consciousness cannot escape from the “context of delusion” (“Verblendungszusammenhang”). Unlike Habermas, who “positivizes” the concept of critique, for Adorno only a concept of critique as “negation” seemed to open a way out – only through the mode of negation could thinking escape the overpowering “ruling system”. But since every “linguistic” formulation of critique – even as negation – also affirms the very thing that is being critiqued, such a strategy also tends to be doomed to failure. In the end, it does not help that “there is solidarity between such [i.e. negative dialectical] thinking and metaphysics at the time of its fall”.²⁰ Against the reification and alienation of consciousness, Adorno invokes a non-identical – that is, for him: aesthetic – identity: “Aesthetic identity seeks to aid the nonidentical, which in reality is repressed by re-

20 Thus the grandiose concluding lines in: Theodor W. Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton, London, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1973, p. 408; *Negative Dialektik*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften in zwanzig Bänden* [GS], ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1966, vol. 6, p. 400.

ality's compulsion to identity."²¹ In the last instance, for the late Adorno, there appeared to be only this "aesthetic" way out. However, "non-linguistic" art alone was capable of escaping affirmation and integration by the leveling system, at least temporarily. Here the only salvation probably would be music, for example that of Arnold Schönberg, insofar as it has not (yet) been appropriated by the "culture industry".

The future of critique

The semantic field of the theoretical concept of critique has proven to be highly contradictory since the Enlightenment – in the arc of tension from epistemology (Kant) and the theory of interpretation (Schleiermacher) via the theory of society (Marx) and the theory of science (critical rationalism, critical theory) to finally the aesthetic theory in the late Adorno. Be it as a critique of cognition, or as a critique of text, science, or society: these compounds always harbor an ambiguity which is not always revealed in the controversies and which embraces both variants of meaning of the genitive, either as subject or as object of critique.

Overall, however, the "practical" concept of critique, has been semantically emptied through its manifold adaptations to divergent, even contradictory positions, which has exposed it to situational elasticity, vagueness, and polysemous arbitrariness. Moreover, in the context of politics and the media, and especially the internet and social networks, the register of critique has increasingly been filled with a potential for excitement and scandalization that is less convincing in terms of argumentation than it is emotionally overwhelming: Moral outrage replaces enlightenment.²²

It is in this context that the swelling complaint cannot be ignored which rings the alarm about the disappearance of public intellectuals who no longer see themselves as nonconformists and thinkers against the cur-

21 Cf. Theodor W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, trans., ed. and with a translator's introduction by Robert Hullot-Kenter, London: The Athlone Press 1997, p. 4; *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1973, in: *GS*, vol. 7, p. 14.

22 Cf. Bernhard Pörksen: *Die große Gereiztheit. Wege aus der kollektiven Erregung*, Munich: Hanser 2018.

rent, but as self-righteous “agents of the good”.²³ A historical-semantic look at the more recent history of the subject of critique thus reveals a double career: a term initially used mostly descriptively in the field of meaning of “judgement”, “distinction”, and “objection” increasingly lost its conciseness through inflationary use. It all too often degenerated into a mere fashionable attitude and became semantically hollowed out. Yet, the concept of critique was also ideologically usurped, used militantly politically as a fighting term, and thus polemically “burned” to the ground, so that its serious use in theoretical and practical discourses has lost more and more credibility.

Despite these shortcomings, a plea for “saving criticism” does not seem at all superfluous at a time when critical voices around the world are increasingly suppressed or persecuted, when presidents and ex-presidents of world powers tend to either criminalize and pathologize criticism of their person and their policies (Putin and Xi Jinping) or denounce them as “fake news” (Trump). The strategy of criminalizing or pathologizing critique excludes the process of critique from theoretical and practical discourse, thereby denaturalizing it. It is precisely actions of exclusion and devaluation of critique by shifting it into “administrative and care discourses” that need special public attention and require all the more a sharpened meta-critique that – depending on the circumstances – not only directs the gaze, for example, to the sphere of competence of bureaucratic-executive, judicial, or medical and psychiatric discourses, but also – if necessary – problematizes their underlying norms.

Is the concept of critique still salvageable?²⁴ The chance would exist at least if some considerations for the assessment of critique were taken into account: If criteria and method of critique are disclosed and freedom, transparency and publicity of critique are guaranteed; if in questions of practical critique not only deontological, transcendental-pragmatic and

23 Cf. Ulrich Schödlbauer and Joachim Vahland (eds.): *Das Ende der Kritik*, Berlin: de Gruyter 1997/2018.

24 Cf. on the interpretation of the concept of critique also Ralf Konersmann: *Wörterbuch der Unruhe*, Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer 2017, pp. 99-106 (keyword: ‘Kritik’).

fundamental-ethical considerations of ultimate justification, but above all also norm reflections of “shorter and medium range” suitable for practice come into focus; if the initial conditions of critique are reflected, their “genealogy”, their “strategy” and “power effects” (Foucault)²⁵, but also intended scandalizing effects are analyzed; if it were asked: Who criticizes whom or what using which arguments on the basis of what norms to what end?²⁶ And what does the counter-criticism or the reaction to the criticism look like? Then there would also be the possibility of verifiability, revisability and openness of a process of criticism, which could regain its time-honored reputation from the spirit of enlightenment.

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25 Michel Foucault: «Qu'est-ce que la critique?» [lecture from 1978], in: *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, no. 84/2, April-June 1990.

26 The question, differentiated in detail, is: Who criticizes whom or what with what arguments on the basis of what norms with what means in what form from what motives and with what intention in what situation and in what context for what purpose or goal? (Admittedly, not every question component must always play a role in the analysis of criticism in the concrete individual case).

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Hamlet as Trauerspiel?¹

Howard Eiland²

Abstract: In *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, Walter Benjamin presents Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a consummate trauerspiel. He distinguishes the trauerspiel, as a hybrid dramatic form arising in the European Baroque period and rooted in Judeo-Christian history, from the classical genre of tragedy, with its roots in pagan myth. Tracing the distinction back through the German critical-philological tradition to Herder and A.W. Schlegel, this paper focuses, first, on the philosophical-historical "antinomies of allegoresis"—such as external regimen and internal chaos—that, according to Benjamin, structure the decentered allegorical world of the trauerspiel and, second, on his analysis of the interwoven themes of "fate" and "play" at work in the tangled intrigue plot of *Hamlet* and in the winged melancholy of the main character. The paper argues finally—contra Benjamin's insistence that *Hamlet's* death is *not* tragic—for the Prince as an archetypally modern tragic hero of recognition and remembrance.

Walter Benjamin's *Hamlet* interpretation—if that's the right term for this set of scattered but packed remarks on Shakespeare's play—is mainly to be found in his semi-hermetic *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, a text first published in 1928 and originally conceived as a dissertation on the still relatively obscure theatrical genre of the Baroque trauerspiel or mourning play, particularly as exemplified by the intrigue-filled and histrionic history plays of the Second Silesian School in mid-seventeenth-century Germany in the period after the bloody Thirty Years' War. Benjamin's study deals with a group of erudite and royally patronized authors such as Andreas Gryphius, Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, and Johann Christian Hallmann, who produced tragical-historical dramas with titles such as "Leo Armenius," "Mariamne," and "Agrippina."

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- 1 Originally presented as a talk for the Program in Critical Theory, University of California at Berkeley, February 2020.
 - 2 Howard Eiland is author, with Michael W. Jennings, of *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (2014). He has translated Benjamin works such as *The Arcades Project* (1999; with Kevin McLaughlin), *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (2006), and *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (2019). He has also published *Notes on Literature, Film, and Jazz* (2019).

Performed by adolescent schoolboy actors from Protestant academies, the plays appealed to a broad public not only through their preoccupation with political and erotic power struggles, with seduction, betrayal, murder, and revenge, frequently involving a female protagonist, but also through their combination of sophisticated rhetorical display with extravagant and often extravagantly violent spectacle, a manner of persistent hieratic ostentation in which particular stage properties play a prominent role. Ghostly apparitions are a regular feature, as are sententiously moralizing speeches in the style of Seneca's tragedies. Whether treating of tyrant or martyr,³ these plays are suffused with a sense of doom and foreboding, an atmosphere in part reminiscent of the medieval mystery and morality plays but absent their eschatology, their prospect onto a beyond, and rendered now thoroughly equivocal not only by the "new interpretation of the earth" consequent upon the Copernican decentering of terra firma but also by the experience of "an empty world" consequent upon the Lutheran decentering of conscience and devaluation of works.⁴ Correspondingly, in Benjamin's philosophical-historical presentation, the very setting of the action in these plays, whether court or dungeon or private chamber, turns into allegorical image writing, a showplace (*Schauplatz*) of secular history as itself a recurrent trauerspiel written in a hieroglyphic of transience. "Baroque drama knows historical activity not otherwise than as the base machination of schemers."⁵ In these plays, with their mad pomp masking brokenness, the clouds gather low on the horizon; there is no transcendence save in the "paradoxical reflection of play and semblance,"⁶ the bombastic play within the play, or in the flash of apotheosis that interrupts spatial and temporal succes-

3 "Tyrant and martyr in the Baroque age are the two Janus-faces of the crowned head. They are the necessarily extreme expressions of...princely being." Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019), 54. Abbreviated below in notes as OT.

4 OT: 158, 141.

5 OT: 77.

6 OT: 69.

sion. The putative heroine or hero is from the first enmeshed in a coil of intrigue, ambiguity, folly, witchery.

Such dramaturgic features point up the relevance of Benjamin's trauerspiel researches to what we traditionally think of as Shakespearean tragedy, though one may well entertain questions about Benjamin's characterization of *Hamlet* as a trauerspiel. How could one *not* have questions, given the interrogatory mood of the play itself as well as the infinitely problematic character of its reception, not to mention the problematic character of the *Trauerspiel* book? At any rate, and especially for English-language readers, Shakespeare's play can serve as an entry point into the *Trauerspiel* book because what this book maintains is that *Hamlet* (and Benjamin cites the play only in the classic translation of 1798 by A. W. Schlegel) is not just any Baroque trauerspiel but, along with Calderón's *La vida es sueño* (*Life Is a Dream*), a consummate instance of the genre—and precisely by virtue of its profound innovation.⁷

Now, the matter is somewhat vexed from the outset because Benjamin here is using the common German word for "tragedy," *Trauerspiel*—coined in the seventeenth century on analogy with *Lustspiel*, "comedy"—in a more restricted sense, one explicitly *contrasted* with the tragic. He taxes educated and uneducated usage alike with a "lax concept of tragedy"⁸ For him, the one dramatic form differs from the other as night from day, tragedy being associated with pagan myth and cult, trauerspiel with Judeo-Christian history and theology. The distinction is in

7 "[I]t is precisely the important works—insofar as the genre does not appear in them for the first time and, so to speak, as an ideal—that stand outside the boundaries of genre. An important work either founds the genre or dissolves it; and in perfect works the two functions unite" (OT: 23). On the constitutive tension between the "elemental" and the "allegorical" in Shakespeare and Calderón, see OT: 250. In a letter of December 28, 1925, to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Benjamin admits: "I am actually not all that familiar with Shakespeare" (*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, trans. M.R. and E.M. Jacobson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 286; abbreviated below in notes as C). The trauerspiel's stock figures of raging tyrant and scheming courtier have analogues also in such works as *King Lear* and *Othello*.

8 OT: 137.

line with a critical-philological tradition reaching back, in Germany, to Herder and A. W. Schlegel, who had likewise distinguished the relative homogeneity of Greek tragedy from the relative heterogeneity of modern drama; as for Shakespearean drama, with its relatively diffuse and dynamic mode of action, it was seen as generically unclassifiable. In a lecture of 1808 afterward echoed by Coleridge, Schlegel (who elevates Shakespeare alongside Calderón as archetypally “romantic” poets, and who is praised by Benjamin in the *Trauerspiel* book for “his characteristic and always impressive sureness of touch”⁹) decisively reverses the neoclassical devaluation of the Bard’s supposedly unruly, gothic, barbarous extravagance, writing instead of the delight which a modern author takes in “indissoluble mixtures; *all contrarieties*: nature and art, poetry and prose, seriousness and mirth, recollection and anticipation, spirituality and sensuality...blended together in the most intimate manner.”¹⁰ And, with Herder, Schlegel is forced to conclude from this intimately antithetical profusion—what Frank Kermode, specifically in regard to *Hamlet*, has called a literary “bazaar”¹¹—that the plays of Shakespeare, with their constantly shifting register of action and of language, are neither tragedies nor comedies in the ancient sense. Schlegel will refer to *Hamlet* as a *Gedankentrauerspiel*.¹²

9 OT: 83.

10 August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black, vol. 2 (London: Templeman and Smith, 1840), 102 (my italics). Benjamin had censured Schlegel for his “high-handed manner” and “lack of urbanity” in an unpublished essay of 1923 on Calderón and Friedrich Hebbel, portions of which essay are adapted in the *Trauerspiel* book. See Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003), vol. 1, 370-71. Abbreviated below in notes as SW.

11 Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare’s Language* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000), 125. Compare Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 240: “The issue is not...simply random inconsistency. There is, rather, a pervasive pattern, a deliberate forcing together of radically incompatible accounts of almost everything that matters in *Hamlet*.”

12 Translated as “tragedy of thought” in *Course of Lectures*, 199.

This argument about genre, which variously recurs throughout the nineteenth century in discussions of Shakespeare¹³ and has become a commonplace, would presumably have conditioned Benjamin's emphasis, both in the *Trauerspiel* book and in two early essays concerned with the subject, on the open-ended hybrid form of the Baroque trauerspiel, with its orchestration of "diverse feelings," as opposed to the closed form and more univocal mode of ancient tragedy, and as anticipatory, not only of eighteenth-century musical opera, but of developments within literary Romanticism and subsequently, Benjamin maintains, within the literary Expressionism of the early twentieth century; in this way, the power of the present will have gathered through the medium of the past.¹⁴ Just as the Romantic tradition of *Hamlet* criticism keeps returning to the operative alliance of "contrarities" in the play, and in doing so may be said to transform and update the insight of the protagonist himself into his own conflicted nature—where "that within" disavows a world of seems, and the powers of Mars and Mercury fall out of accord as they never did in his father—so Benjamin's reading of *Hamlet* as an exemplary trauerspiel highlights the workings of a historical dialectic within both the play and the epoch in which it was produced. In other words, he highlights the play's paradigmatic modernity. I referred a moment ago to the particular existential and moral situation of the epoch in which, as a consequence of the antinomian attitude of Lutheranism toward everyday life, a new and at times unbridgeable distance arose, as we have heard said many

13 Compare Benjamin's citation of Novalis: "In Shakespeare, poetry alternates throughout with anti-poetry, harmony with disharmony, the common, abject, and ugly with the romantic, lofty, and beautiful, the real with the invented; it is precisely the opposite with Greek tragedy" (OT: 126). See also *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Penguin, 1992) 84, 136, 188, 335, 343, 351, 566n9.

14 See OT: 91. In "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" (1938), Benjamin says of Baudelaire: "Because he had no convictions, he assumed ever new forms himself. Flâneur, apache, dandy, and ragpicker were so many roles to him. For the modern hero is no hero; he is a portrayer of heroes. Heroic modernity turns out to be a trauerspiel in which the hero's part is available" (SW4: 60 [translation modified]).

times, between outer and inner worlds—in this case, between external orthodoxy and internal uncertainty—such as eventually opened the way to Romanticism. The Baroque experience of irreconcilability between the rigorous practical morality which the church taught in the conduct of bourgeois life and its doctrinal rejection of “good works” as a criterion of salvation, though dutifully accepted in the practice of “the people,” Benjamin writes, occasioned only melancholy in “great ones,” those in whom insurmountable *taedium vitae* bespoke a vision of the quotidian world as “a rubble field of half-completed, inauthentic actions.”¹⁵

Benjamin thus traces the combined impact of a “theology of history” and “theology of evil” on the allegorical structure of the Baroque trauer-spiel, while that structure in turn discloses, often inconspicuously, “antinomies of the allegorical” understood to body forth “the epoch’s spirituality, as it revolves in contradictions”—like the contradiction between enormous artificiality and longing for nature.¹⁶ Defined, first of all, by the interaction of *Trauer* and *Spiel*, the ostensibly opposed spirits of mourning and play, the trauerspiel as literary genre and historical image presents a more or less warring synthesis of intentions theological and artistic. More specifically, it operates, in Benjamin’s exposition and actualization, under the auspices of the “dialectic of Saturn,” a concept largely indebted to the researches of the Warburg school and of their predecessor Karl Giehlow. The name “Saturn,” here designating a “demon of antitheses,” signifies both the astral influence of the heavy, cold, dry planet and the telluric influence of the old agricultural god—the one, the distant planet, conferring on the soul both sluggishness and the power of contemplation, with the other, the sower god, representing both the fall of the seed to the ground and its opening to the light.¹⁷ Both dimensions, terrestrial and celestial, the gravitating and the radiating, are comprehended in the Baroque topos of melancholy, that dismal and divinatory state of mind

15 OT: 140, 141. In the Baudelairean context, *taedium vitae* turns to spleen as a consequence of self-estrangement; see Convolute J67a4 in *The Arcades Project*.

16 OT: 234, 252, 184, 39.

17 OT: 153.

and body that “rises from the depths of the creaturely realm.”¹⁸ In sections 53-55, Benjamin takes up in some detail Dürer’s “Melencolia I,” the familiar engraving of the winged brooder who sits within an allegorical setting strewn with utensils of active life lying unused on the ground. The reflective, indeed mortifying gaze of the melancholic, according to Benjamin, drains the life from its objects, hollowing them out and, at the same time, turning the scattered corpse-things—the *disjecta membra*—into emblems and rebuses of its own subjectivity, thereby filling the rubble field with a strangely heightened life. It is by such means that mourning becomes “the mother of allegories” as well as their vital content.¹⁹ In the perspective of the allegorizing temperament, in fact, the whole of nature becomes a book of secret signs and dark conceits, a manifold moving image script (*Schriftbild*) seeming to bear on human guilt and redemption. As product and source of melancholic immersion, “these allegories fulfill and revoke the nothingness in which they present themselves [*das Nichts, in dem sie sich darstellen*].”²⁰ Extremity of paradox thus prevails at the end of the *Trauerspiel* book, where Benjamin evokes “the bleak confusion of Golgotha” as an image not just of the wilderness of human existence but of transience in itself as “the allegory of resurrection.”²¹ What strangely emerges in this image of Golgotha, “legible as a schema of allegorical figures in a multitude of engravings and descriptions of the period,” is then the dialectical reversal—or, let us say, cinematic dissolve—of crucifixion into resurrection through the vertiginous turnabout (*Umschwung*) of allegorical immersion, in which something is legible as other, *allos*, than what it literally is. The melancholy, it is important to remember, is winged.

At issue in the dialectical arc of immersion—for the allegory that goes away empty-handed awakens, we are told, in God’s world—is nothing

18 OT: 149.

19 OT: 251.

20 OT: 255.

21 OT: 254.

less than “the triumph of subjectivity.”²² And in the *Trauerspiel* book, as I read it, this entails the *self-overcoming* of subjectivity in what is called knowledge of good and evil, knowledge that is beyond all objective knowledge and that is at bottom, Benjamin writes, simply knowledge of evil—evil as allegory. This melancholic knowledge rooted in falling and estrangement, and therefore to be distinguished from Socratic intellectualism,²³ is deemed the *origin* of allegorical vision. In the “subjective gaze of melancholy,” the heights and depths of soul converge, circles within circles, disclosing in all ambiguity “the theological essence of the subjective.”²⁴ The avowed subjectivity, triumphing over every objectivity of law, assimilates itself, as hell, to divine omnipotence by recognizing *in itself* “the real, effective reflection [*die wirkliche Spiegelung*] of empty subjectivity in the good.”²⁵ Awakening thereby to the “empty abyss of evil” into which it has always already fallen, subjectivity reads its own equivocal reality as an allegorical mirror-play within something higher and deeper: “Subjectivity—which, like an angel, falls into the deep—is retrieved by allegories and is held fast in heaven.”²⁶ It is reflection by virtue of subterranean luminosity, the holy accessed through the grim. It is the logic of losing yourself in order to gain yourself. And, strangest of all, in the leap across to “resurrection,” such allegoresis is faithless, *treulos*. As a capacity of the spirit of language—which spirit is necessarily, as Benjamin puts it, at home in the fall—allegorical reading as patient dismemberment nevertheless works from moment to moment to articulate allegorical totality, as the subjective perspective is incorporated through reflection into an economy of the whole. This is the formula for the transfiguring singularity of apotheosis that, building from the constellation of disparate incidents, from the ruinous web of intrigue, crowns the idea of

22 OT: 256.

23 “If Socrates’ teaching that knowledge of the good makes one do what is good may be in error, this is much more the case with knowledge of evil” (OT: 250).

24 OT: 255.

25 OT: 256-57.

26 OT: 251-52, 258.

trauerspiel.²⁷ “In the image of apotheosis,” the image of self-transcending subjectivity, monadically expansive in concentration, “something different in kind from the images of succession stands out, affording both entry and exit to mourning”²⁸ Aside from noting the proximity of the allegorical “patchwork” (*Stückwerk*) to the theory and practice of montage in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, with its panoramic Baudelairean orientation and its techniques of superimposition, I would simply ask: how is this melancholy self-transcendence, in which good and evil turn into each other, different from the victory-in-downfall traditionally associated with the genre of tragedy and the so-called tragic vision?

It was Benjamin’s conviction, stated toward the end of his study, that the theory of the trauerspiel is calculated to furnish “prolegomena” to the interpretation of Shakespearean “tragedy,” and of *Hamlet* in particular. He had been interested in the play since his student days. A curriculum vitae from 1911 mentions his “detailed study of *Hamlet*” during his final years of secondary school, and we know that, in a high-school graduation-exam essay, he discussed the “great brooder” Hamlet as one who “runs aground on life.”²⁹ That same year, 1911, he published in the student-run journal of the antebellum German Youth Movement, *Der Anfang* (The Inception), a polemical piece entitled “Sleeping Beauty,” in which, as a model of the spirit of awakening youth, and possibly in recollection of Nietzsche’s citing of Hamlet as dionysian/nihilist intellectual in *The Birth of Tragedy* (section 7), he adduces Shakespeare’s play as a “tragedy of modern man.” Quoting the celebrated lines that conclude Act I, he emphasizes Hamlet’s avowed reformist mission to set right what is painfully out of joint in his society. As for the avowed disgust with the world and bitterness of heart: “Only consciousness can and must be of

27 Benjamin discusses “the Baroque propensity for apotheosis” (OT: 191) in section 63, “The ruin.”

28 OT: 258.

29 Benjamin, *Early Writings: 1910-1917*, trans. Howard Eiland and Others (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 50, abbreviated below in notes as EW; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp (1989), 535-36.

help. Though the world be ever so bad, you came to make it better." No irresolute dreamer this. He concludes in a classic spirit of tragic irony similar to that of his graduation essay: "Hamlet succumbs to the world and remains victorious."³⁰

Between then and the composition of the *Trauerspiel* book, which began twelve years later, the influence of Romanticism made itself felt more distinctly on Benjamin's thinking about the play, and his interpretation developed in fundamental respects. Already in the productive summer of 1916 that was followed in the fall by the drafting of an ontological theory of language later utilized in the *Trauerspiel* book,³¹ he was variously distinguishing tragedy from *trauerspiel*, in the two essays mentioned above, and defining the latter in terms of a linguistic principle at once archaic and modernist: "the word in transformation."³² There is a kind of catharsis at work in the play of mourning, arising through the variegated and shifting choreography of the drama and its presentation of affects: "Mourning conjures itself in the mourning play, but it also redeems itself.... [T]he diverse feelings of the comic, the horrible, the awesome, and many others each have their turn in the round dance."³³ It is in effect an integral centrifugal unity-in-transformation achieved through a musically surging diversity of feeling. "There is, so to speak, no pure *trauerspiel*."³⁴ The stage was now set for the construction, on a broader

30 EW, 27.

31 Material from the 1916 essay, "On Language As Such and on the Language of Man," is adapted in sections 77 and 80 of the *Trauerspiel* book (OT: 244-45, 256).

32 "The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy" (1916), in OT: 268.

33 OT: 270 (translation modified). Benjamin speaks of "the round dance of presented ideas [*Reigen der dargestellten Ideen*]"—in which truth, the discontinuous realm of ideas, is actualized—in the Epistemo-Critical Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book (OT: 4, 5, 9). In section 23, which concerns the irresolution of the tyrant figure in the *trauerspiel*, he discusses "the continually changing storm of emotions" (56) animating the royal personages in the plays; and, in section 34, he notes the priority of the presentation of affects (*Darstellung der Affekte*) over the construction of the action in the typical Baroque *trauerspiel*.

34 OT: 270.

problem-historical scale, of the *Trauerspiel* book itself, which took place between March 1923 and spring 1925.³⁵

Hamlet is touched on at several junctures in the *Trauerspiel* book, most extensively in sections 50 (entitled “The witching hour and the spirit world”), 57 (“Hamlet”), and 78 (“The terrors and promises of Satan”). At stake here, again, is less a developed argument than a series of hints, some of which have appeared, to more than one reader of the published text, as riddling in the extreme.³⁶ Perhaps, then, a critical traversal of Benjamin’s comments on the play is in order.

The difference between tragedy and trauerspiel seems to pivot, in the *Trauerspiel* book, on the relative importance of the world of things, a governing concept of *The Arcades Project* begun in 1927. “For there is little that distinguishes modern drama more sharply from the ancient than the fact that in the latter the profane world of things has no place.... But if tragedy is completely cut off from the world of things, this world looms oppressively over the horizon of the trauerspiel.”³⁷ Benjamin devotes considerable attention to the role of stage properties in the Baroque trauerspiel, not without mentioning the poisoned rapier and chalice that (a little like objects in fairy tales) determine the course of events in Act 5 of *Hamlet*. The “nightmare with which material things [*die Realien*] burden the action” of trauerspiels comprehends both spatial phenomena of the *Dingwelt* and “otherworldly phenomena with a predominantly temporal character,” that is, ghostly apparitions—for brooding breeds

35 In letters to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin describes the composition of the *Trauerspiel* book as a “reckless [*tollkühnen*] escapade” causing him considerable “anguish” (C: 236 [March 5, 1924], 242 [June 13, 1924]; see also, in a prouder vein of “unmitigated chutzpah,” C: 260-62 [February 19, 1925]).

36 See Carl Schmitt’s 1956 monograph *Hamlet or Hecuba* (trans. David Pan and Jennifer R. Rust [New York: Telos, 2009]), where Benjamin is criticized for obscurity at one point (60) and, more recently, Rebecca Comay’s excellent “Paradoxes of Lament: Benjamin and Hamlet,” in *Lament in Jewish Thought*, ed. Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 266-67: “Benjamin’s remarks on *Hamlet* are unbearably elliptical and even more hermetic than usual.”

37 OT: 134.

ghosts—and prophetic dreams.³⁸ Corresponding to this pronounced, nightmarish externality in the setting of the drama, in the *mise en scène*, is the attention to weather and time of day. The action of the *trauerspiel* typically unfolds at night. Like German Baroque dramas by Gryphius and Lohenstein, *Hamlet* begins at midnight, the “hatchway of time,” in Benjamin’s spatiotemporal threshold metaphor;³⁹ and the “witching time of night” later figures directly, almost as an incantation, when Hamlet is on his way to visit his mother (3.2.379),⁴⁰ figuring implicitly at other points. Characteristic of the *trauerspiel* form is its bloody finale, something which researchers in the past have seen as a distortion of the Greek catastrophe, but which actually exemplifies best of all this drastic externality. Benjamin cites a German publication of 1902, on the metaphysics of the tragic, that criticizes the “physiological motivation” at work in the death scene of *Hamlet*, the “entirely external contingency” by which matters are settled and by which the “tragic character of the drama” is completely undermined. Precisely the point! counters Benjamin: Hamlet’s death “has no more in common with tragic death than the Prince himself has with Ajax.”⁴¹ In its “vehement externality” this death scene, with its parade of corpses, bears the stamp of the *trauerspiel*. Of course, earlier commentary on the play, particularly during the Enlightenment, noted the role of chance and contingency in the resolution of the plot, what Fredric Jameson has called, in a chapter on the play that moves from Walter Benjamin to Jacques Lacan, the “sloppy denouement,” with its “accidental massacre.”⁴² Again, Benjamin turns the indictment on its head:

38 OT: 134.

39 OT: 135. A hatchway is an opening to a hold of some kind. *Luke der Zeit* could also be translated as “time’s trapdoor.”

40 *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982).

41 OT: 137. Benjamin quotes the German philosopher and critic Leopold Ziegler, *Zur Metaphysik des Tragischen*. Compare Schlegel: “the criminals are at last punished, but as it were by an accidental blow, and not in a manner requisite to announce, with solemnity, a warning example of justice to the world” (*Course of Lectures*, 202-03).

42 Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), 110.

what looks like a series of accidents is for the melancholy Dane, who dwells in possibility, a providential tiding only he can divine, a mysterious directive wherein time is constellated and fate is wedded to chance, to what befalls: “As his conversation with Osric indicates, Hamlet wants to imbibe the fate-saturated air, like a poisonous substance, in one deep breath. He wants to die by chance, and as the fateful stage properties gather around him, as around their lord and master, there flashes up at the conclusion of this trauerspiel, as though contained within it and, naturally, overcome [*als in ihm einbeschlossenes, freilich überwundenes*], the drama of fate.”⁴³

When first confronted with the ghost of his father in “complete steel,” Hamlet frees himself from his companions and exclaims—perhaps, even at such a moment, punning on the Latin etymology (*fatum* is “what is spoken”)—“My fate cries out.” As Jacques Derrida has noted in another context, “fate” (which in German comes from a root meaning “to send,” “to occasion”) is one of Benjamin’s most enigmatic themes.⁴⁴ In section 47 of the *Trauerspiel* book, “Concept of fate in the drama of fate,” it is said that, “[h]owever it may disguise itself in pagan, mythological guise, fate is meaningful [in the Baroque trauerspiel] only as a natural-historical [*naturgeschichtliche*] category in the spirit of the restoration theology of the Counter-Reformation. It is the elemental natural force [*Naturgewalt*] in historical occurrence,” and as such it is bound up with rhythms of creaturely guilt: “Fate is the entelechy of occurrence [*Entelechie des Geschehens*] in the field of guilt.”⁴⁵ Creaturely guilt is not the same as mor-

43 OT: 138. Benjamin may have in mind Hamlet’s remark to Osric at 5.2.171, “it is the breathing time of day with me” (to be contrasted with the witching time of night, when “hell itself breathes out Contagion to this world” [3.2.380-81]), and he is probably also thinking here of the famous lines on readiness a little later in the scene (215-20), after Osric’s exit.

44 See Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law,” trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 275, 285. Derrida discusses *Hamlet* more specifically in *Specters of Marx* (1994).

45 OT: 128, 129. Discussing the attitude of Lutheranism toward everyday life in section 51, however, Benjamin notes that there was “a share of Germanic paganism and dark belief in the omnipresence of fate expressed in the overbur-

al failing: the subject of fate, proclaims Benjamin, quoting himself (the essay “Fate and Character”), is indeterminable. In the discontinuous “force field” of fate’s working, as depicted in the drama of fate that is a variant form of the *trauerspiel*, “everything of material and occasional importance is so heightened that the entanglements...betray...one thing: a fate has galvanized this play.”⁴⁶ Where it does not “cry out,” then, fate intimates itself in the guise of accident, obliquely articulating an entanglement of things fallen and dispersed. Discussing the protagonist’s subjection to fate through jealousy, in Calderón’s Herod drama, Benjamin characterizes the meaning of chance in terms of “the dissolution of occurrence into elements parceled out like things, [something which] corresponds entirely to the meaning of the stage property.”⁴⁷ Making for “the true order of eternal recurrence,” which is not to be conceived as simply temporal, fate’s “manifestations seek out spacetime [*Zeit-Raum*].”⁴⁸

In the section devoted to the figure of Hamlet, Benjamin conceives of fate together with personhood as intertwined mysteries. The mystery of Hamlet’s person (*Geheimnis seiner Person*) “is contained in the playful—but, for that very reason, measured—passage (*spielerischen eben dadurch aber gemessenen Durchgang*)” through various parceled-out “stations” within the complex of intentions (*durch alle Stationen dieses intentionalen*

dened reaction that, in the end, drove from the field the good work as such, and not just its meritable and penitential character. Human actions were deprived of all value” (141). In the “pagan-Catholic” world of Calderón’s dramas, “fate unfolds as the elemental spirit of history [*Elementargeist der Geschichte*]” (129). Benjamin had earlier, in “Fate and Character” (written 1919, published 1921), invoked “the Greek classical development of the idea of fate” (SW1: 203).

46 OT: 129. Benjamin goes on, citing Johannes Volkelt’s *Ästhetik des Tragischen* (1917): “If one were to believe that ‘where we meet with improbable coincidences, extravagant situations, ...the impression of the fateful is gone,’ one would be entirely in the wrong. For it is precisely the remote combinations, which are here nothing less than natural, that correspond to the various fates in the various fields of action” (129).

47 OT: 133.

48 OT: 135.

Raums).⁴⁹ The *Durchgang*, the spatiotemporal going through, Benjamin says, is measured *because* playful. In other words, it is only through the *wager*, knowingly undertaken in profound uncertainty, that Hamlet gets the deed done, overcoming his fate in performing it. As is well known, Shakespeare's play entertains a principle of play. I take it, moreover, pace Carl Schmitt, that Benjamin's highlighting of the drama's decentered "Christianity"—which of course sits uncomfortably atop the old revenge plot—has to do with this principle of world play and ontological playacting, embodied in such things as Hamlet's declared ethic of readiness (recalling the stance of the actor and fencer as much as that of the apostle) in a world of "maimed rites" (5.1.212) and shattered rituals, where "wisdom haunts only equivocally."⁵⁰ At stake here, perhaps, is something like the resolute vulnerability attributed to the figure of the poet in Benjamin's early essay "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin."⁵¹ After being at sea in every sense, Hamlet proves ready to leap—into the grave—the *moment* he gets his cue, altogether in keeping with the conception of special providence or precipitous grace at which he arrives in

49 OT: 163. "This is the core of the allegorical vision, of the Baroque profane exposition of history as the Passion of the world [*als Leidensgeschichte der Welt*]*—meaningful only in the stations of its decline [Stationen ihres Verfalls]*" (OT: 174). Benjamin speaks of "stations of reflection" (*Stationen der Betrachtung*), as befitting the presentation of philosophical inquiry, in the Epistemo-Critical Foreword (4). Compare, from 1927 on cinematography, "unexpected stations" within an environment (SW2: 17).

50 OT: 163. Schmitt argues, in *Hamlet or Hecuba*, that "Hamlet is not Christian in any specific sense" (61; see also, on "the baroque theatricalization of life," 38-44). Compare, from Benjamin's "Central Park" (1938-39): "the Catholic worldview...could be reconciled with allegory only under the aegis of play" (SW4: 163). On shattered ritual, see Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 238. On ontological playacting, Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, 94. On readiness, Hugh Grady, "Hamlet as Mourning-Play," *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 36 (2008), 158-60.

51 "Courage is the life-feeling of the man who gives himself up to danger, in such a way that in his death he expands that danger into a danger for the world and at the same time overcomes it. The greatness of the danger originates in the courageous person—for only in striking him, in his total submission to it, does it strike the world. In his death, however, it is overcome; it has reached the world, which it no longer threatens" (EW: 191 [1914-15]).

the end, readiness being predicated on the sense of eternal transience. This presumably bears on Benjamin's idea of an apotheosis that flashes up (*blitzt auf*). Signaled most obviously by Horatio's evocation of "flights of angels," the apotheosis of Hamlet remains inseparable from the character's compelling—no doubt, demonically tinged—humanity, the deep and complex *menschliche Gestalt* that distinguishes him decisively, not only from the Amleth of primitive legend but also, Benjamin stresses, from the figures of the *German Baroque trauerspiel*, in which there are no heroes standing out from the constellations.⁵² This was the heart of Shakespeare's innovation. I've touched on the importance for Benjamin of the melancholiac's withering, self-negating, transfiguring *gaze*.

Hamlet alone is, for the trauerspiel, spectator by grace of God [*Zuschauer von Gottes Gnaden*]; it is not, however, what a man might play for him [*was sie ihm spielen*] but only his own fate that can satisfy him. His life, as the exemplary object of his mourning, points, before its extinction, to the Christian providence in whose bosom his mournful images turn into blessed existence [*seine traurigen Bilder sich in seliges Dasein verkehren*]. Only in a life of this princely sort is melancholy, on being confronted with itself, redeemed.⁵³

Only consciousness can be of help (as Benjamin had written in 1911) in the redemption of life's melancholy—consciousness attuned to the depths through mourning. As for the mystery of Hamlet's fate (*Geheimnis seines Schicksals*), we are told (mysteriously enough), that it is inscribed in a course of action, *in einem Geschehen*, "entirely homogeneous with this his gaze"—the brooding allegorizing gaze of the melancholiac as witness. I am reminded of the guiding principle announced in the Epistemo-Critical Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book, namely that truth is not an unveiling that abolishes the mystery but a revelation that does it justice.⁵⁴ The sentiment is consistent with Hamlet's vigilant stewarding, evinced in the little dialogue with Guildenstern, of his own inscrutable

52 See OT: 132.

53 OT: 163.

54 OT: 7.

mystery.⁵⁵ Caught between the desire to renounce the uses of this world and the desire to act with perfect conscience, the philosophical intruder-martyr Hamlet, in keeping with the epoch's spirituality as it revolves in contradictions, incarnates in his own person and fate "both Wittenbergian philosophy and a revolt against it," both the world-weariness of "saturnine *acedia*," and "the unique spectacle of [its] overcoming in a Christian spirit."⁵⁶ The rest is paradox.

A final question: Granted the telling *formal* differences between tragedy and trauerspiel that Benjamin marshals in the wake of the critical-philological tradition and under the banner, it is clear, of a theory of modernism, and granted, therefore, the crucial *historical* differences, the emergence of a new uncertainty and dissonance pervading the world of Baroque trauerspiel—something that makes it fundamentally darker than the world of classical tragedy, and no less so because of its darkly "comic interior"⁵⁷—can one really say that Hamlet's death is not tragic? At issue in the question is not what we loosely call tragic loss but an idea of tragic heroism or of "the tragic life" (Georg Lukács' term appropriated by Benjamin in this context). Even if you think, with some recent critics of the play,⁵⁸ that rather than restoring order and decency to the realm the Prince ends in failure, with the state delivered over to a foreign power and he himself the engine of some five or six deaths besides his own, there remains, amid all the amazing variety and contradiction in his *character*, the magnanimity that is obvious even to his enemies and that, if I can revive a thoroughly dated conception, may be said to counter, in a spiritual and moral sense, the destructive impersonal fatality by which

55 "You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery..." (3.2.355-57).

56 OT: 140-41, 161, 163.

57 "Indeed, the trauerspiel reaches its high point not in canonical examples but where, with playful transitions, it makes the *Lustspiel* within it resound. It is for this reason that Calderón and Shakespeare created more important trauerspiels than the Germans of the seventeenth century, who never got beyond the rigid type" (OT: 126).

58 See, for example, Philip Edwards, "Introduction," *Hamlet* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 2003), 58-61.

it is tested: so that one can affirm, in the words of the antebellum student-activist (which, I believe, are basically consistent with the argument in the *Trauerspiel* book), that in his ordeal Hamlet succumbs to the world while remaining victorious. No doubt the spiritual triumph is muted. But does it not boil down, once again, to the formula of *tragedy* we have all grown used to? If not a sacrificial hero, then a hero of recognition and remembrance.

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Kracauer, Kant, and the Detectives

Gray Kochhar-Lindgren¹

Abstract: This article extends our understanding of Siegfried Kracauer's reading of the detective novel as an example of a technocratically diminished *ratio*, as a social hieroglyph of a failed modernity, and, in particular, as what Adorno called an "historicophilosophical allegory"² that transcodes the transcendental schema of Immanuel Kant into the prefabricated templates of the classical detective novel. In this movement of allegory, Kracauer transposes Kant's schema of the synthesis of experience, the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental ego, and the question of the meaning of the "aesthetic" into questions constellated around the meaning of the *ratio* in the classical detective novel. For Kracauer, the trajectory of the monodimensional detective novel concludes when both the detective and the criminal are slumped in easy chairs behind the revolving doors of a hotel lobby, and, yet, he cracks open these doors in the hope that through the action of a critically interpretive consciousness the lobby, the detective novel, and the social formations of modernity might end up somewhere other than as *kitsch*, might yet release a different futurity into the composition of everyday life.

A book of philosophy should be in part a very particular species of detective novel, in part a kind of science fiction. By detective novel we mean that concepts, with their zones of presence, should intervene to resolve local situations. --Gilles
Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*

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 - 2 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," *New German Critique*, no. 54 (2001): pp. 159-177.

I play the game for the game's own sake...
 Sherlock Holmes, "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans"

Siegfried Kracauer's *The Detective Novel: A Philosophical Treatise*, written in Weimar between 1922-25 (but not published until 1971), marks a particularly intriguing knot in the history of several genres, including philosophy, theology, history, and the politics of everyday life. Kracauer's interpretation of the *ratio* in the detective novel—through a sociological imagination focused on overlooked specificities linked with a metaphysical engagement with Immanuel Kant—is a critique of the *ratio* as an instrumentalized, technical, and eviscerated concept of reason. This *ratio* is not just a concept deployed in the narrow domains of formalized philosophy, but, rather, also a sign of the abstracted vacuity of lived experience across the social formations of modern urbanism.³

Kracauer joined a number of his contemporaries who "thought that in the study of society small details were as important as the larger view, an approach he shared with Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin... [they all thought that] these enigmatic traces were clues which indicated something about the world that discursive thought had not yet captured. They are the mysteries, the problems which make up the subject matter of philosophy, the tracks which must be followed"⁴. In *The Detective Novel*, Kracauer is hot on the trail for clues strewn within the discursivity of the formulaic novel that will reveal the crimes of modern societies. The detective novel obscures and reveals these crimes, but the revelation requires an active cultural critique to reverse the mechanisms of displacement and obfuscation, the false *ratio* that pretends to master the world

3 For more recent interventions into the questions surrounding the ratio, see Martin Jay's *Reason after Its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory*; Richard J. Bernstein's review-essay focused on Jay's book, "The Unresolved Problems of Late Critical Theory"; and Daniel Andrés López' "Lukács: the antinomies of bourgeois philosophy and the absolute."

4 Colin Harper, "The Philosopher as Detective," *Philosophy Now*, no. 5 (1993), https://doi.org/https://philosophynow.org/issues/5/The_Philosopher_as_Detective.

of the insidious, if eclipsed, criminality of industrial capitalism and its correlative politics.⁵

In the classical detective novel—proliferating after Poe’s invention of C. Auguste Dupin and his nameless interlocuter in “Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) and culminating in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes (1887f) and Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot (1920f) series—the desiccated hierarchy of the metaphysical order, the turbulence of ethics and politics, and the anxiety generated by the stone-faced impersonality of the metropolis mirror themselves in an enormously popular narrative form. This mirroring is necessarily distorted, but it is this distortion that holds within its shadows and its irregularities the possibilities that might be able to modify, in an extremely modest manner, the current order of things. The sociology of everyday life that is expressed in the detective novel is linked at the hip, for Kracauer, with the history of modern philosophy, especially in its post-Kantian forms.

Kracauer was, in Theodor Adorno’s words, “spared the fate of professional philosophy, the doom of being established as a department, a specialized discipline beyond the other specialized disciplines; accordingly

5 Philip Kerr’s final novel, *Metropolis* (2019), is set at precisely the time Kracauer & Company are laboring to create an alternative Weimar culture and politics. It is divided into sections called “Women,” “Decline,” and “Sexuality” and its opening sentences are: “Like anyone who’s read the Bible, I was familiar with the idea of Babylon as a city that was a byword for iniquity and the abominations of the earth, whatever they might be. And like anyone who lived in Berlin during the Weimar Republic, I was also familiar with the comparison frequently made between the two cities” (9). And, now, we also have the media extravaganza of *Babylon, Berlin*. In a recent *Los Angeles Review of Books* article, “Trump, Scorsese, and the Frankfurt School’s Theory of Racket Society,” Martin Jay writes that “in the post-liberal age, whether it be called monopoly or state capitalism, organizational tendencies were restoring such direct, unmediated power arrangements in which any pretense of representing general interests or universal principles had been abandoned.” The de-generation of an authoritarian and racist populism has now “returned” in different guises in different parts of the hyper-globalized world—there are other forms of populist representation possible—but there is still time, I hope, for remaking democratic institutions in a different direction. The U.S. Capitol was attacked on January 6, 2021, and a new President is now in the White House. The issues, however, must be continuously worked through and Babylon, Berlin is not available for viewing in my region.

he was never intimidated by the line of demarcation between philosophy and sociology".⁶ He was, therefore, able to transpose a philosophical training and disposition into the tasks of cultural observation and critique. Philosophy, in this context, operates not as a specialized discipline that "demarcates" itself within a university, but as a *cross-roads* for an exchange of multiple genres, disciplines, and historical conflicts.⁷ Kant and Kierkegaard, a pair that may seem to us an incongruously odd couple, were both of signal importance in Kracauer's Weimar milieu. Kant provides the transcendental schema of rational knowledge and the aesthetic that will be "transposed," in a distorted manner, into the detective novel. While Kierkegaard still provides a faded sign for the paradox of an authentic existence between the "spheres" of the high and low, Kant will be our focus since this is the path of techno-scientific modernity that the classical detective novel is most persistently, if unconsciously, transposing into its narrative predictabilities.

Philosophy, Ratio, and the Detective Novel

Scholarly attention to *The Detective Novel* has focused for the most part on the chapter entitled "The Hotel Lobby," primarily because it was included by Kracauer in his 1963 collection *Das Ornament der Masse*, which was then translated by Thomas Y. Levin in 1995 as *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. This was a wise selection by Kracauer, for it is this chapter that most vividly expresses what Levin has called Kracauer's "allegory

6 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," *New German Critique*, no. 54 (1991): pp. 159-177.

7 As Adorno reminisced in "The Curious Realist," "For years Kracauer read the *Critique of Pure Reason* regularly on Saturday afternoon with me. I am not exaggerating in the slightest when I say that I owe more to this reading than to my academic teachers. Exceptionally gifted as a pedagogue, Kracauer made Kant come alive for me. Under his guidance I experienced the work from the beginning not as mere epistemology, not as an analysis of the conditions of scientifically valid judgments, but as a kind of coded text from which the historical situation of spirit could be read, with the vague expectation that in doing so one could acquire something of truth" (2001, 160, my emphasis). What a reading-group that must have been.

of lack"⁸ and Adorno an "historicophilosophical allegory"⁹. Metaphysics, social relations, and the history of capitalism are all interpreted by Kracauer as a fragmentation from an "organic whole" of a religious community, as an example of a *Gemeinschaft* articulated by Ferdinand Tönnies, that exists in the in-between of human finitude facing expectantly toward the transcendence of God. With this fragmentation of modernity into the transactional functionality of the *Gesellschaft*, there is a correlative evacuation of meaning that is compressed in the allegorical form of the popular genre of the detective novel whose *telos* is a soporific nodding off of the readers while slumped in an easy chair in the lobby of a hotel. Kracauer wants to see if he can, perhaps, awaken the reader to the failure of the *logos*, the *nomos*, and to the presence of an underworld criminality that hides in plain sight in the overworld of daily life through his critique of the classical detective novel.

"The Hotel Lobby" is complemented by chapters on "Spheres," "Psychology," "Detective," "Police," "Criminal," "Metamorphoses," "Trials," and "The End," but the lobby offers the most tangible social and spatial hieroglyph to be read with a philosophically nuanced allegorical eye.¹⁰ "Every typical space," Kracauer has said in a well-known observation, "is created by typical social relations which are expressed in such a space *without the disturbing intervention of consciousness*. Everything that consciousness ignores, everything that it usually just overlooks, is involved in the construction of such spaces. Spatial structures are the dreams of a society"¹¹. Whatever we take for granted, and therefore no longer see

8 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Hotel Lobby," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 173-188.

9 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," *New German Critique*, no. 54 (2001): pp. 159-177.

10 Koch and Gaines give an overview of the chapters of *The Detective Novel in Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction* and David Frisby traces its textual history of production and reception in "Between the Spheres: Siegfried Kracauer and the Detective Novel."

11 Siegfried Kracauer, "Über Arbeitsnachweise: Konstruktion Eines Raumes," in *Schriften*, vol. 5, 1930, pp. 185-182.

since it remains “unconscious,” is revelatory to the critical eye, and the detective novel for Kracauer consists not of “real” characters who accurately mirror concrete individuals, but, instead, it is constructed from abstract templates that represent the historical diminishment of logical and material spaces, the *ratio* as an evacuated abstraction, and the emptiness of the regular rounds of life in a disenchanting Weimar.

The hotel lobby is the architectural and narrative symbolic space of transactional exchange to which Kracauer wants to add the “disturbing intervention” of consciousness as a sign of a modest hope of releasing a minimal amount of utopian energy from an aesthetic form that is almost, but not quite, a work of art. It gestures distantly toward authentic art, but can never reach that goal since it is bound to the linear *telos* of predictability. In the stories of Poe or in the novels of Conan Doyle, Christie, or Gaboriau we will, we know, find out who-did-it, as well as how and why. There is a completion of the cycle of expression, explication and explanation. Reading cannot be *surprised* by the traditional detective novel and Kracauer wants to explicate this experience of being-stalled by the habits of a generic production and consumption of writing and reading, and then, perhaps, through the action of criticality to crack open the form toward something different. The detective story, for him, is a genre cobbled together from prefabricated narrative templates for prefabricated readerly pleasures; and, therefore, it represents in quite a precise manner the vacuity of social and metaphysical life governed by a history of reason diminished into the procedures of an instrumentalized technicity of the *ratio*.

Kracauer’s final subtitle for his text is *A Philosophical Treatise*—a 1971 replacement of his original “An Interpretation”—but what value does this phrase add to the more typical literary-critical readings of the detective novel? First, it recognizes that every analysis has within itself an implicit philosophical dimension that expresses a theory of meaning, expressivity, and an x-ray machine that reveals a given social structure. Kracauer makes this implicitness explicit and is *staking a claim* on philosophy’s history, domains of knowledge, textual genealogies, and its double-task of

reflective critique and a projective creation of a critical-cultural opening. In part, this is a question of the strange prestige of a philosophically inflected critique—simultaneously elevated and ignored—in a deracinated and consumptive society that appears in conjunction with the brutal pragmatism of an industrial capitalism linked with the rapidly emerging power of National Socialism. Through the classical genre of the philosophical treatise (*Traktat*) Kracauer is able, thirdly, to bring to bear on the detective novel the formidable conceptuality of the tradition, especially, in this instance, of Kierkegaard and Kant.

In Kracauer's understanding of the function of the detective novel, the coupling that decouples the history of reason and the autonomous freedom of individuality plays out within the tension between the systematicity of Kant's critical enterprise and Kierkegaard's insistence on the individual experience of paradox as essential to human authenticity. According to Adorno, Kracauer's thinking emerges from a "negative idea of substance... [rather than] a true theological need, that bound him to Kierkegaard and existential philosophy, which he came close to in monographs like the unpublished one on the detective novel..."¹². While it is true that the "negative idea of substance" motivates much of the analysis of the detective novel—in which "substance" is as much a psychosocial as a metaphysical category—theology, in its positive sense that maintains a relationship of differential connections between higher and lower spheres of existence, is also important for the Kracauer of this period. It is, after all, the possibility of abiding within the very tension between these "spheres" that motivates Kracauer's hope for an overcoming of the absolute corrosion of the operations of the *ratio* that characterizes modernity.

This "tension" is one of Kracauer's key conceptual tools in his treatise on the socio-metaphysics of the detective novel. Fundamentally, he uses it to signify a set of porous but identifiable boundaries between the exemplarity of the transcendence of the religious life of a believing community

12 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," *New German Critique*, no. 54 (2001): pp. 159-177.

and the vapid nihilism of the immanent life of those who have sacrificed the human bonds of community of a *Gemeinschaft* for the emptiness of an abstract *ratio* of a *Gesellschaft*. While these binaries are too simplistic for our own tastes—we have all been taught to read differently—this “tension” cannot be thought apart from the relationality of concepts, including “spheres of existence”:

If the sphere circumscribes an ensemble in which only the emancipated *ratio* carries a guarantee, the superior spheres give greater place to the integrated man for whom the *ratio* is only an element. It is this elevated sphere that Kierkegaard has given the name ‘religious’...the supreme mystery, the extreme limits of speech and acts.¹³

We can see a table of values being constructed here, and comparing Benjamin’s reading of the allegorical with the one developed by Kracauer, David Frisby observed that “such a comparison is strengthened by the seemingly strangely archaic analogy which Kracauer himself draws between the theory of spheres derived from Kierkegaard and the spheres within which the action of the detective novel takes place”¹⁴. As the “spheres” are transposed from Kierkegaard to, for example, Sherlock Holmes, they lose their “tension” and collapse in upon themselves, disenchanting the world.

This momentary glitch of reading, marked by a sense of the “archaic,” indicates a kind of failed translation between the Kierkegaardian theological categories and the move toward a sociological political economy of the detective novel. Kracauer does not, in fact, systematically delineate how these spheres take shape; how they come to “circumscribe” what particular “ensemble”; how the *ratio* might be “emancipated”; or how human beings might move *between* these spheres in the circuitry of daily life, but he does lament the slow collapse of their boundaries as the “higher” sphere falls into the immanence of the “lower” sphere. This

13 Siegfried Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman: Ein Philosophischer Traktat* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971).

14 David Frisby, “Between the Spheres: Siegfried Kracauer and the Detective Novel,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 9, no. 2 (1992): pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327692009002001>.

very articulation of the division is, of course, telling, leaving us quite solidly within the framework of at least the ruins of a Platonic-Christian metaphysic. (Heidegger would publish *Being and Time*, with its deconstructive impetus, in 1927.)

Already in the opening lines of his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and the Life of the Spirit," Georg Simmel had claimed that the "deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, and of technique of life"¹⁵. The detective novel, for Kracauer, carries forward precisely these questions about modernity, social forces, space, meaning, and the accelerating indifference of the metropolis. That Kracauer's analysis is "primarily a reflection on the changing forms of modern space, is suggested by such coinages as *'ungesittigte Leere'* ('unsated void'), *'unbegrenzte Raumwüste'* ('boundless spatial desert'), and *'entleerter Lebensraum'* ('evacuated life-space'). The fictional detective emerges in response to a pointillist universe in which people, actions, and things are like disparate molecules spreading apart in a post-Newtonian cosmos"¹⁶. The idea of transcendence as an accessible totality carried by either the detective or by the philosopher, in different registers, has become only a bungled sleight-of-hand trick that will lead, in the end, only toward *kitsch*.

Dupin, Holmes, Poirot, and their European compatriots all employ an acutely singular observational form of thinking and a capacity, often called "genius" and always differentiated from the ordinariness of the rather dull perceptions of both the police and the reader, for linking apparently random sensible intuitions—thoroughly empirical observations of what *looks to be* random—to form a narrative of a chain of evidence that leads to a conclusion about who perpetrated the crime and how. This is the method of "abduction," a term invented by C.S. Peirce that he defined

15 Georg Simmel, "Bridge and Door," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach, trans. Mark Ritter (London, England: Routledge, 1997), pp. 63-76.

16 Kenneth S. Calhoun, "The Detective and the Witch: Local Knowledge and the Aesthetic Pre-History of Detection," *Comparative Literature* 47, no. 4 (1995): pp. 307-329, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1771326>.

as the sequence of a logic in which “the surprising fact, *C*, is observed: ‘But if *A* were true, *C* would be a matter of course,/Hence, there is reason to suspect that *A* is true’”.¹⁷ Thinking backwards through a present observation in order to move forward in understanding. Such considerations of the logic of detection places this entire constellation of the detective genre within a familiar form of “philosophical treatise” on the random and the ordered, the empirical and the rational, the word and the deed, and the concatenation of series of events linked causally by the detective through a retelling of the apparent order of events into a rearranged order that corresponds with the actual order of the events. As it moves forward in a backward manner, the detective novel unveils the truth.

The apparent contingency of actions demonstrates, when read correctly by the detective, its own precise and exhaustive logic. Kracauer’s complaint about the *ratio* is not that it operates as a synthesizing operation between different sensible intuitions—this will be one of his (dis)connections to the Kantian project—but that it has developed historically as a kind of predictable *mimicry of the understanding* into an eviscerated form of knowledge and thereby become fragmented from the aesthetic,

17 Charles Sanders Peirce, “Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism,” in *The Essential Peirce, Volume 2: Selected Philosophical Writings, 1893-1913*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project, vol. 2 (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 133-241. — Flórez discusses this (mis)translation in detail. Abduction—which has since Peirce’s formulation been enmeshed in a history of arguments about its “true” meaning—is a “thinking backward,” as it were, from the observation of the “effect” to the abduction of the “cause.” This is the highly stylized operational logic of the classical detective—although with an outcome of certainty rather than probability—but it is also the logic of psychoanalysis and scientific experimentation that is open to the unexpected. In a text that is quite close to Poe and his successors, Robert A. Paul develops the sequential hermeneutic chain of psychoanalytic work in “The Purloined Freud,” which discusses the logic of (unconsciously) intended consequences, while, for the process of experimental science, Frederick Grinnell passes through Doyle’s “Silver Blaze” and the multiple forms of Peirce’s definition of abduction and its extensions by others to his conclusion that he is “suggesting a second way to understand abduction that includes conventional ideas but incorporates an important additional feature. That is, for a research scientist doing experimental work, abduction sometimes describes the logic of a surprising observation that becomes reconfigured as an unintended experiment about an entirely new research problem” (2019, 225).

the affective, the communal, and the religious. The *ratio* as the operational principle of the bureaucratized utilitarianism of urban experience *narrows* human possibility and even the detectives are only able only to demonstrate the *ratio* as a “pseudo-logos”¹⁸ in which the “pseudo-” has infiltrated every element of life.

Kant and the Detectives

What does a detective do? He [sic] solves puzzles. What is a puzzle? For Kracauer, it is “like a type of negative ontology”¹⁹ that needs filling-in. What does it take to solve puzzles? That is a very good question and Immanuel Kant thinks assiduously about this under the form of the “conditions of possibility of experience,” since for him everything is a riddle that cannot, finally, be “solved” — the world keeps worlding—but that can be articulated in an extraordinarily inventive architectonic of thought. The detective novel, a meagre scrap of compositional force, is simply a habit-inducing soporific, a social drug, unless a critical catalyst with a slow-burning fuse is lit by the hiss of a scratched match deep within its structure. Kracauer is lighting such a fuse and Kant marks a symptomatic node in the history of metaphysics that through its unresolved fragmentations contributed, if unintentionally, to a diminution of experience that finds its expression in the detective novel. It is not, of course, that Kant “caused” the disenchantment of modernity—a history that has been traced in innumerable ways—but that his enormous labors articulate divisions of the faculties of knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics that are difficult in the extreme to re-bind, to re-loop into a more “living whole” (a phrase that the early German Romantics and their heirs have elaborated upon in multiple ways).

In a letter to Keyserling on October 13, 1908, for example, Simmel had already complained that he was working “once again with the feeling

18 Siegfried Kracauer, *Le Roman Policier: Un traité Philosophique*, trans. Rainer Rochlitz and Geneviève Rochlitz (Paris, France: Payot, 2001).

19 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, “The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer,” *New German Critique*, no. 54 (2001): pp. 159-177.

that we are just going round like squirrels on a wheel in this whole epistemology that rests on Kantian presuppositions. What a thing this man did to the world by declaring it to be a representation! When will the genius come along who frees us from the spell of the subject as Kant freed us from that of the object? And what will 'the third' be?" (GSG 22: 666). We are perhaps freed from the subject and the object at the same time, but this "same time" is interminable in its arduously slow unweaving and the creation of a "third" (that, when the time arrives, will not be understood as a "third" since there will no longer be the "two" that produce the need for the three). The squirrels will at last be free to leap with great joy across the high branches of the trees.

Kracauer, along with his entire generation, picks up this Kantian conundrum, but he does not respond to the dilemma by writing his response in a "traditional" philosophical genre that will explicate, and presumably correct, Kant. Instead, he composes newspaper essays, interviews white-collar workers, wanders around town keeping an eye out, goes to the movies, watches geometries of dancing girls, and writes about all the detective novels that everyone is reading. Rainer Rochlitz notes, echoing Adorno, that "[T]he historico-philosophical reading of Kracauer follows closely the structure of Kantian thought. His fundamental idea consists of reading the *Critique of Pure Reason* like a philosophical detective novel: like a novel of an emancipated intellect"²⁰. Emancipated, perhaps, in Kant, but in the detective novel the intellect has been "unmoored" and "diminished" as it becomes more narrowly tyrannical in its operations. Just as the Hotel Lobby signifies a falling away from the community and architecture of religion, the detective genre is a fall from the heights of the possibility of an experience of existence in which the spheres of life are kept in a dynamic tension with one another, thus giving meaning to finitude. Modernity, foreshortened by the short-sightedness of technocapitalism, has withered into the empty façade of the *ratio*.

20 Siegfried Kracauer, *Le Roman Policier: Un traité Philosophique*, trans. Rainer Rochlitz and Geneviève Rochlitz (Paris, France: Payot, 2001).

Kracauer's allegorical method claims that, for example, "The regulative ideas which are the 'principles that orient the activity of the understanding' and which according to Kant, serve to 'ascend in the series of conditions up toward the unconditional,' appear in the detective novel as the heuristic principles on the basis of which the detective engages in his investigation"²¹. The Kantian regulative ideas of God, the World, and the Self—which can never become objects of knowledge but nonetheless guide all thinking—are collapsed into the flattened heuristic of the detection of clues in the parlor, on the street, or in the hotel lobby. Kracauer may have read Kant's critique as if it's a detective novel, but he also reads the detective novel as if it's a diminished and deformed version of the Kantian critiques of knowledge, morality, and aesthetics. Three aspects of this process, highlighted in *The Detective Novel*, provide points of illumination for Kracauer's sociological-philosophical methodology of transposing Kant, including: 1) the synthesis of experience, 2) the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental ego, and 3) the question of the meaning of the "aesthetic." All of these bear on the question of the meaning of the *ratio* in the detective novel and its symptomatic function in the social *milieu* of Weimar.

As Mike Wayne has so succinctly articulated the process, Kracauer "transcodes the work of Kant into historical-materialist terms"²², in which "transcoding," a term borrowed from Fredric Jameson, is a "the ability to move from one critical method or code to another..."²³. Every text, every distribution of signifying materiality, is an interwoven palimpsest for every other text. Each genre, all of which have porous boundaries, has multiple signifying codes at work that function as a loosely coordinated ensemble, and, therefore, each genre can also be transcoded through dif-

21 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," *New German Critique*, no. 54 (2001): pp. 159-177.

22 Mike Wayne, "Transcoding Kant: Kracauer's Weimar Marxism and After," *Historical Materialism* 21, no. 3 (2012): pp. 57-85.

23 Carolyn Lesjak, "History, Narrative, and Realism: Jameson's Search for a Method," in *On Jameson*, ed. Caren Irr and Ian Buchanan (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 27-50.

ferentiating relays and mediations into another. The metaphoricity of all languaging opens passages and there are always junctures, switch-backs, and displacements at work. Philosophy can become the detective novel can become critical theory can become a detective novel can become philosophy. (And film is always in close proximity.)

There are, then, no final distinctions between “philosophy,” “literature,” and “critique,” or between the supposedly distinct “faculties” that Kant delineates in his three critiques. (We will return to this claim shortly.) There are, however, differences of intensities, layerings, and genealogies that are at work between these genres and there is always a critical labor to be undertaken as the “transcoding of the Kantian ‘problematic’ on reification into terms congruent with a Marxist framework brings what is *already symptomatically outlined* in Kant’s philosophy to a point of *critical consciousness*. Furthermore, it grounds the possibility of this consciousness in the historical-material reality itself that needs changing”²⁴. The “symptomatic” in Kant becomes more visible, and therefore more analytically diagnosable, in the historical-material framework of Kracauer’s Weimar. Kant, like the detective novel and the hotel lobby, has obscured regions that we take for granted and therefore have stopped seeing. Kracauer intervenes with a critically creative eye to reconfigure the texts, their histories, their social contexts, and, therefore, their possible futurities. Writing on reading opens passageways.

Discussing Émile Gaboriau’s *L’Affaire Lerouge* (1866), Kracauer writes that the novel “reflects in the domain of the aesthetic the spontaneity of the *ratio* that establishes a legislative relationship between the pulverized elements of the material of intuition and those conforming to the principles inherent in the subject of knowledge”²⁵. This is also an articulation of how, in the operation of what Kant calls a “synthesis,” there can be the enigmatic coalescence of the chaotic tumult of sensory experience

24 Mike Wayne, “Transcoding Kant: Kracauer’s Weimar Marxism and After,” *Historical Materialism* 21, no. 3 (2012): pp. 57-85.

25 Siegfried Kracauer, *Le Roman Policier: Un traité Philosophique*, trans. Rainer Rochlitz and Geneviève Rochlitz (Paris, France: Payot, 2001).

toward the “given as something that is solely formed by the intellect, which shapes the chaos into an object through its creative power...The detective novel deprives the material of its proper form by condemning it to a passivity and avoids coming to grips with the *ratio*”²⁶. The classical detective novel has ceded its artistic possibilities of creating an active mediation between the transcendental *ratio* and the empirical world. Kracauer’s critical intervention cracks open, however slightly, the static form (and Raymond Chandler, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Kobo Abe are yet to come).

The *ratio* occurs within the aesthetic realm, which at this moment is simply the banal sense of the domain of art as a separate dimension of experience than the pure reason of scientific knowledge or the practical reason of morality. In the detective novel the *ratio* acts to synthetically connect the “pulverized” fragments of sensibility, as both perception and meaning, into a (distorted) object of a givenness that is present to a “subject of knowledge.” The entirety of this complex synthetic process, which Kant develops in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is constitutively *warped* in the debased genre of the detective novel as a sign of the disenchanting historical-philosophical conditions in which such a novel was able to gain such a massive readership (which included, of course, those not-too-shabby readers Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Kracauer himself).

The “subject of knowledge,” for Kant, is always an enigmatic inseparability of the double dimensions of the empirical subject that each of us is with the structural *a priori* possibility of experience given by the “transcendental subject,” the “I think” that accompanies every experience. The fractured “I” is the uncanny instantiation of the necessary and universal transcendental categories that are determined as an empirically defined self who listens to music and is writing on an early Saturday morning in a Hong Kong full of blue sky and water. The detective, in turn, is an odd figuration of a kind of historical emptiness of the subject, a cardboard cut-out of the potential richness of the empirical subject given the possibility of experience by the structure of the transcendental

26 Ibid.

aesthetic of space and time and the categories that conjoin it with the synthetic function of the transcendental subject.

The detective as the “representative of a governing principle, of a higher reason, is the only figure to resemble a god. It is he who can make the connections that remain hidden to the others”²⁷. Kracauer argues, rather obliquely to be sure, that the figure of the detective stands in for the one-who-knows, and, contrary to the police, “practices the art of deduction for its own sake—this is the law of the genre—and he is never wrong. It demonstrates the all-encompassing power of the ‘transcendental subject’ through which the diversity of the world of objects is only materially chaotic and finally reduced to nothing other than ‘something,’ which takes form through the work of the intellect”²⁸. The pseudo-divine intellect of the detective synthesizes the chaos of materiality into a coherent narrative object of knowledge and then he steps in as the maestro of the observational logic of abduction, which “appears to the ordinary apprehension as preternatural”²⁹. It’s as if the *ratio* of the “transcendental subject,” in this scenario, simply overwhelms the dappled singularities of the “empirical subject” of everyday life, creating an empty abstraction of both value and knowledge as it reduces the razzmatazz of the world to a vacuous “something.”

This is not, however, how the transcendental subject operates for Kant—it is not a “something” that could be allegorized—and the “disenchantment of the world” from an abundant life to an etiolated *ratio* must have its source elsewhere, from within the immanence of history and its social distributions. But let’s stay, for just a while longer, in the murkiness of the concept of transcendental subject. Deleuze remarks that “Kant will invent the splendid formula: a something=x. You will tell me that it’s not a something=x when I say it’s a table or a lion, it’s not

27 Gertrud Koch and Jeremy Gaines, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

28 Siegfried Kracauer, *Le Roman Policier: Un traité Philosophique*, trans. Rainer Rochlitz and Geneviève Rochlitz (Paris, France: Payot, 2001).

29 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” *PoeStories.com*, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://poestories.com/read/murders>.

a nothing, but the any-object-whatever [*l'objet quelconque*], the object= x , only receives a determination as lion, table, or lighter by the diversity I relate to it. What I would like you to understand is that in any case there is an any-object-whatever, the object= x is a pure form of perception. I do not perceive objects, and it's my perception which *presupposes* the object-form"³⁰ (my emphasis). This particular kind of "something"—far from being a vacuousness—is the necessary formal structure for any perception at all and does not replace the richness of the experience of the empirical, but, instead, it makes it possible. Lion, table, lighter, detective novel, and an easy chair waiting for us in the lobby.

This is difficult to understand. Deleuze extends his explanation of this relationship between the transcendental and empirical subject:

There is indeed a subject, Kant will say, which is subordinated to appearances and which falls into sensory illusions; it will be called the *empirical subject*, but there is another subject which is evidently neither you nor me, which above all is not reducible to any empirical subject, which will be from that point on named the *transcendental subject* for it is the unity of all the conditions under which something appears, appears to whom? Appears to each empirical subject. It's already beautiful as a system of ideas. I hope you can feel its extent, it's a tremendous machine.³¹ (my emphasis)

A tremendous machine, indeed, and one that the classical detective novel cannot derail, although it can, and does, act as a symptomatic index of a more historically determined diminishment of the reason of the *ratio*. The symptomatic in Kant has been transposed into the symptomatic in the detective novel. Viruses travel.

If the Kantian synthesis of the coherence of the world and its enactment through the relationship between the empirical and transcendental subject are two of the fundamental philosophical *topoi* that Kracauer is transcoding, then another is the category of the aesthetic. The detective

30 Gilles Deleuze, "On Kant: Synthesis and Time," *Lectures by Gilles Deleuze*, February 2007, <http://deleuzelectures.blogspot.com/2007/02/on-kant.html>.

31 *ibid.*

novel, for him, “forms a totality out of the blind machinations of a decayed world”³², presenting an illusion of an aesthetic totality out of that which is actually chaos of fragmented things, individuals, and forces. In an abstract manner, the detective and the formal rationality of logical deduction is a “non-paradoxical, one dimensional form of thought,’ [that] unite[s] the paradoxical and capture the transcendental in the immanent”³³. The aesthetic, somewhat confusedly, slides between the genres of art—literature in this case—and the Kantian faculty of perception, the beautiful, the sublime, and a presumed purposiveness of nature.

For Kracauer the aesthetic is a false totality, a decay of rationality, which “originally” included a fullness of authentic existence set between the infinite and the finitude of the inanimate, into the procedurality of the rules of the detective. This has become a “truth,” that is fully calculable. The production of the detective novel is formed by a “civilized society that is perfectly rationalized, an idea that is understood from a radically unilateral standpoint and which is incarnated under the stylized form by an aesthetic refraction”³⁴. The detective novel, a warped form of the possibility of the aesthetic, illuminates the distorted social conditions in and from which it emerges. But it takes someone like Kracauer to be able to *read* these hieroglyphic distortions and set them into motion toward a different critical space. The deductions of the detective fulfill the propositions that establish the truths of what-happened, while critique in Kracauer’s sense can never close off this space of propositionality.

Wayne asserts that “Kracauer’s trajectory thus parallels Kant’s own aesthetic turn, where in the third *Critique* Kant explores the possibility of an interpenetration between the objective and the subjective that the modifies both, de-reifying the transcendental subject and socializing the individual subject by introducing culture and the aesthetic”³⁵. This, perhaps,

32 David Frisby, “Between the Spheres: Siegfried Kracauer and the Detective Novel,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 9, no. 2 (1992): pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327692009002001>.

33 Siegfried Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman: Ein Philosophischer Traktat* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971).

34 Ibid.

35 Mike Wayne, “Transcoding Kant: Kracauer’s Weimar Marxism and After,” *Historical*

is reading the historico-philosophical allegory a bit too tightly, for while the *Third Critique* does develop a different set of relations between “object” and “subject,” the transcendental subject, in Kant’s specific sense, could never be “de-reified” since it is not in the first place a “thing” accessible in the empirical world of experience. The detective novel “forms a totality out of the blind machinations of a decayed world” (Kracauer, 1971, 116), it presents as an aesthetic totality that which is not a totality but a chaos of things and fragmented individuals. In an abstract manner, the detective and his formal *ratio* of his ‘non-paradoxical, one dimensional forms of thought,’ unite the paradoxical and capture the transcendental in the immanent’³⁶ (Frisby, 1992, 9). Only, however, in the abstract.

There is only a minimal philosophical-aesthetic suggestiveness, for Kracauer, that opens the way from the quasi-artwork of the detective novel toward a clearer sense of how a transformation of the etiolated *ratio* that has abandoned the fullness of existence might be actively reshaped. There is the artificially constructed suspense of the plot, but without the naturally occurring sacrality of the level of the transcendent. Kracauer’s critical intervention points to this very lack, and, therefore, engages a possible supplement that would re-trigger the tension of differentials. “In the same way that the detective uncovers the secret buried among men, the detective novel reveals in the aesthetic sphere the secret of the disenchanting society and its marionettes devoid of substance. Its composition transforms the life incapable of self-knowledge into an interpretable copy of authentic reality”³⁷. There is, then, a *mark of possibility* woven into the fabric of the genre, but, since it itself is a form of abstraction that only parodies the whole, it cannot directly transpose the conditions of existence into a new ensemble of relations.

In a rather odd twist, Kracauer argues that the “Kantian definition of the beautiful is instantiated here [in the detective novel] in a way that

Materialism 21, no. 3 (2012): pp. 57-85.

36 David Frisby, “Between the Spheres: Siegfried Kracauer and the Detective Novel,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 9, no. 2 (1992): pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327692009002001>.

37 Siegfried Kracauer, *Le Roman Policier: Un traité Philosophique*, trans. Rainer Rochlitz and Geneviève Rochlitz (Paris, France: Payot, 2001).

takes seriously its isolation of the aesthetic and its lack of context. For in the emptied-out individuals of the detective novel—who, as rationally constructed complexes, are comparable to the transcendental subject—the aesthetic faculty is indeed detached from the existential stream of the total person³⁸. Kracauer has left the transcendental aesthetic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* behind, if still suspended in place, and moved on to the reflective judgements involved in the invention of the aesthetic as analyzed by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*.

If we wish to decide whether something is beautiful or not, we do not use understanding to refer the presentation to the object so as to give rise to cognition; rather, we use imagination (perhaps in connection with understanding) to refer the presentation to the subject and his feeling of pleasure or displeasure. Hence a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment and so is not a logical judgment but an aesthetic one, by which we mean a judgment whose determining basis cannot be other than subjective.³⁹

More succinctly, “if the question is whether something is beautiful, what we want to know is not whether we or anyone cares, or so much as might care, in any way, about the thing’s existence, but rather how we judge it in our mere contemplation of it (intuition or reflection)”⁴⁰. Reflective judgments of taste resonate as the powers of reflection, not logical or cognitive representations, and have to do with the pleasure of an object—existent in the usual sense of this term or not—as it encounters our capacities of imagining and feeling.

These reflective judgments “must be valid in virtue of something which is universal and at the same time aesthetic, i.e., a feeling state which can be shared by all. The pleasure which is reported (or in Kant’s words ‘serves instead of the predicate’ in judgments of taste is of an unusual sort. It

38 Siegfried Kracauer, *Le Roman Policier: Un traité Philosophique*, trans. Rainer Rochlitz and Geneviève Rochlitz (Paris, France: Payot, 2001).

39 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

40 Ibid.

is ‘disinterested’⁴¹. Strange, but fascinating. This singularizable universality is the capacity of the “‘free play’ of the cognitive faculties that brings them into what Kant calls a ‘proportionate accord’ with each other, which is the necessary condition of cognition in general. And the requirements of cognition in general are ‘imagination for the gathering together of the manifold of intuition, and understanding for the unity of the concept uniting the representations’⁴². *Übereinstimmung*: harmony, a concurrence that resonates as the mood of an atmosphere and the atmosphere of a mood. We are once again very close to the synthesis of the “object of knowledge” by the transcendental subject, but now the focus is on feeling and a sense of pleasure rather than on cognitive coherence.

The detective novel poses, through Kracauer’s allegorizing, the immense questions of the meaning of reason, the rules through which the mind imposes order on the chaotic randomness of sensory experience, and how all of this might lead toward, or away from, a community of feeling of belonging to the world. The detective novel does not address these questions in the manner of a philosophical system, but, instead, as popular fiction that renders almost invisible the questions of posed by critical philosophy into a predictable aesthetic structure of the production-line of the detective, the police, and the criminal. Such a novel cannot, of course, “contain” the complex *gravitas* of the Kantian project, but it can, as it were, show it in an attenuated form of a failure to be sufficient to its own questions. “‘The more life is submerged, the more it needs the artwork,’ Kracauer claims, ‘which unseals its withdrawnness and puts its pieces back in place in such a way that these, which were lying strewn about, become organizing in a meaningful way’⁴³. Something different begins to slowly take shape as the “withdrawnness” is withdrawn by the re-drawing that are the acts of art and critical consciousness.

41 Jane Kneller, “Kant’s Concept of Beauty,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (July 1986): pp. 311-324.

42 Ibid.

43 Siegfried Kracauer, “The Hotel Lobby,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 173-188.

A reader of the social hieroglyphs of daily life like Kracauer twists, amplifies, and redirects the text so that it speaks in another voice capable of maintaining at least the minimal possibilities for the utopian power of philosophy and art to create, out of its potential energy, a new condition of life. This voice speaks about the murder-plot, about the plodding police who are unable to combine analysis and the imagination, and about the brilliance of the *outré* detective who can deduce events from a letter hidden in plain sight, from the ash of a cigar, or from the silence of the dog at night. It also speaks, however obliquely, about the costs of industrial capitalism, the loss of an ethical sphere, and the etiolation of reason that has become the emptiness of the *ratio*. This *ratio* of modernity can add up accounts, but it cannot fathom accountability and it cannot take account of the full range of the particularities of possible ways of human flourishing.

The Easy Chair and the Revolving Doors of the Hotel Lobby

The Detective Novel is, at the end of the day, a frustrating book to work one's way through. One reader describes it as "ponderous"⁴⁴, others as "curiously vapid and indefinite"⁴⁵, and another notes that "[P]hilosophers were uninterested in his subject matter and readers of detective novels had no patience with his method"⁴⁶. Kracauer is repetitious and the *ratio* becomes a kind of *tic*, a kind of tick-tock. He often writes in long-winded circumlocutions that never really add to our knowledge of the detective novel's operations or of the opportunities and pitfalls of writing a historico-philosophical allegory linking the reduction of the Kantian system to the *ratio* of the detective. He never sufficiently takes on the task of analyzing, either sociologically or philosophically, how the spheres of existence emerge, are maintained or lose their ontological tension, or

44 Julia Karolle-Berg, "On the Popularity of the Kriminalroman: the Reception, Production, and Consumption of German Crime and Detective Novels (1919-1933)," *The German Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2018): pp. 305-321, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12077>.

45 Gertrud Koch and Jeremy Gaines, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

46 Martin Jay, "The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer," *Salmagundi*, no. 31/32 (1975): pp. 49-106.

how art, philosophy, or critique might provide a sufficiently articulated passage from one to another that can resist the flattening of affect and significance.

There is a static structure of thought that undergirds the text and a nostalgia for the “correct” relationship between transcendence and immanence. Kracauer longs for an authenticity of the individual and the communion of the social order that lives in the tension of a finitude that knows its condition through the infinite made paradoxically present. He misses Kierkegaard, but he is left, unfortunately, with a diminution of Kant. This irritation on our part as readers, however, is merely a complaint about a fantasized book that was never written, and, more importantly, it is just Kracauer’s attempt to read the detective novel in this strange allegorical way, and the final failure of that attempt, that makes the text nonetheless so *fascinating* even though this occurs alongside the accompanying frustration. After all, for the most part the detective novel fails as well, and some of us continue to devour that genre. In other words, we have *aspirations* for the concepts of Kracauer’s text; there are many provocative possibilities of allegorizing relations between philosophy and fiction; and we want to keep reading both as forms of the other. In the end, though, it all comes down to an easy chair and a set of revolving doors in the lobby of a hotel. Any hotel in any large city.⁴⁷

In the hotel lobby, that deracinated dwelling of the disencharnted marionettes, “In tasteful lounge chairs a civilization intent on rationalization comes to an end, whereas the decorations of the church pews were born

47 “A fascination with the urban hotel belonged to Weimar Germany’s moment and was by no means unique to Kracauer. Indeed, by the time he began writing his Berlin *feuilletons* in the mid-20s, the grand hotel has already become a standard trope across popular and high cultural lines, from the ‘transcendental homelessness’ of Georg Lukács’s ‘Hotel Abyss’ to Vicki Baum’s relentless spinning *Drehtür*” (Katz, 1999, 137). For an extraordinary take on the lobby, the chair, and how dance returns to interrupt the weary lethargy of the white-collar worker, see Fatboy Slim’s “Weapon of Choice,” a music-video filmed in 2000—directed by Spike Jonze and danced by Christopher Walken—that is staged in the lobby of the Marriott Hotel (now the L.A. Grand Hotel Downtown) in Los Angeles. Many thanks to Nik Ettel for pointing me in this direction.

from the tension that accords them a revelatory meaning"⁴⁸. The hotel lobby is the inverted Church. It is not just the pews, but the entirety of the architectural adventure of the cathedral that embodies a world that has since evaporated, but still remains in the atmosphere as a faded image of ruin. "The end of the detective novel is the incontestable victory of the *ratio*—an end without tragedy, but tainted by a sentimentality that is one of the aesthetic constituents of *kitsch*"⁴⁹. Not aesthetic revelation, but a pseudo-sentimentality. Travel, leisure, wealth, and the familiarly exotic ambience of a new hotel.

We find ourselves dozing off in a hotel lobby in Frankfurt, in Berlin, in Hong Kong, or in LA, at the Bonaventure for example, with a well-thumbed detective novel half-opened on the armrest. The transcendental ego and the unity of apperception have become the laughable absurdities of *kitsch*. Slowly, our eyelids heavy, we sink into the chair, the novel, the lobby, and our sociability. Each of these "reveals a yawn within each concept or object, a moment when a thing strains against itself. Indeed, each concept, object, document, and symbol is an incomplete and ongoing process motivated by this internal straining"⁵⁰ (Daddario 2020). Negative dialectics, however, does not allow the "whole" to be anything other than a mirage and out of this mirage—ficticity, *irreality*, imagination—the work of art, such as the detective novel, is hammered into the shape of a revolver and a revolving door.

Without being an artwork, the *detective novel* still shows civilized society its own face in a pure way than society is usually accustomed to seeing it. In the detective novel, proponents of that society and their functions give an account of themselves and divulge their hidden significance. But the detective novel can coerce the self-shrouding world into revealing itself in the

48 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Hotel Lobby," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 173-188.

49 Siegfried Kracauer, *Le Roman Policier: Un traité Philosophique*, trans. Rainer Rochlitz and Geneviève Rochlitz (Paris, France: Payot, 2001).

50 Will Daddario, "The Negative Dialectics of Social Distancing," *3:AM Magazine*. <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/the-negative-dialectics-of-social-distancing/>.

manner only because it is created by a consciousness that is not circumscribed by that world.⁵¹

An *active and activist reading* is necessary for such a showing-forth to occur. The negativity of the *ratio* of rationality—analagized by Kracauer to the zero and to nothingness—can only be overcome if the fraying fabric of the social world in which this *ratio* is deployed is punctured and punctuated by art, by critique, and by alternative practices of gluing together the fragments of the world. This etiolated *ratio* is, however, still very much active in our own period.

Christopher Hawthorne, the architectural critic for the *Los Angeles Times* from 2004 to March 2018 (and now the city's Chief Design Officer), visited the lobby of the Bonaventure Hotel through which Raymond Chandler and Frederic Jameson will criss-cross with Kracauer's detectives and all the dapper criminals lounging about nonchalantly in the lobby:

4:15 p.m.: Cup of coffee in hand, I find a seat in the lobby, next to one of Portman's signature gurgling fountains. There is something of the casino layout in the Bonaventure's largely windowless design. Looking up, I can see the hotel's elevators, another of the architect's trademark touches, gliding up and down inside cylinders of smoky gray glass. To my right, across the fountain, is the lobby bar, another cylinder. (The interior is a riot of circles and ovals)...But looking down, I notice that the carpet at my feet features the blue and brown color palette that was fashionable maybe eight or ten years ago. And then realize my chair is a handsome cherry wood. Exactly what I was dreading: the wrong kind of out of date.⁵²

This casino capitalism—which has only intensified since Kracauer's Weimar or even his United States—is designed to keep everyone disorient-

51 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Hotel Lobby," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 173-188.

52 Christopher Hawthorne, "The Wrong Kind of Time Capsule: Notes on an Afternoon inside John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel," *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-building-type-an-afternoon-at-the-bonaventure-20180104-story.html>.

ed inside this windowlessness of the hotel, a different type of the uncanny space that Simmel was already describing in the modern metropolis. This modernity of *ennui* is a dullened and numbed terror. There is dread here, but the dread is not of the zero of the meaninglessness of the *ratio*, but of the “wrong kind of out of date,” an out-of-dateness that does not renew itself in either the richness of nostalgia or in the impulse toward a slightly different design, if not for utopia itself. Kracauer’s spheres, too, are still nebulously here, but diffracted, a “riot of circles and ovals” that cannot coalesce into a sphere. The time and the space are out-of-joint, just as they were for Kracauer, but in a different key, a different style.

The revolving doors into the hotel are starkly distinct from the doors into a cathedral. As Simmel remarks:

When the masonry openings in Gothic or Romanesque cathedrals gradually taper down to the actual door and one reaches it between rows of semi-columns and figures that approach each other more and more closely, then the significance of these doors is obviously meant to be that of leading into but not leading out of somewhere... ..Life on the earthly plane, however, as at every moment it throws a bridge between the unconnectedness of things, likewise stand in every moment inside or outside the door through it will lead from its separate existence into the world, or from the world into its separate existence.⁵³

Simmel’s description of the door distinguishes the entrance to a church from the entrance to a hotel or into the first pages of a detective novel, but we need to add one more set of doors, the revolving glass doors leading into the hotel lobby, if we are to settle into the somnolent luxury of capitalism.

The story goes like this: Theophilus Van Kannel hated chivalry. There was nothing he despised more than trying to walk in or out of a building, and locking horns with other men in a game of ‘oh you first, I insist. But most of all, Theophilus Van Kannel hated opening doors for women. He set about in-

53 Georg Simmel, “Bridge and Door,” in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach, trans. Mark Ritter (London, England: Routledge, 1997), pp. 63-76.

venting his way out of social phobia. And that's how, in 1888, Theophilus Van Kannel was awarded US Patent #387571 A for a 'storm-door structure,' which would soon become known as the revolving door. Van Kannel's invention was an improvement of the pre-existing *Tür ohne Luftzug*, (literally, 'Door without draft of air') by the German inventor H. Bockhacker. The first revolving door was installed in a restaurant called Rector's in Times Square in 1899.⁵⁴

Round and round the mulberry bush, the monkey and the weasel chase one another through the not quite transparent reflective whirl of comings-and-goings of men, women, capital, and of meanings and relations. It is the circularity of bad repetition, bad infinity. Spin the wheel for red or black. Pop. It all falls down.

Perhaps, though, it just keeps going round and round in a variety of repetitions and returns. Considering the "joint" of Hamlet's "the time is out of joint," Deleuze states simply that the "joint is the hinge" and that the "hinge is what the door pivots around. But the door? We have to imagine a revolving door and the revolving door is the universal door. The door of the world is a revolving door"⁵⁵. He goes on to explain the great Kantian invention of the auto-affective uncoiling of time from within itself—and Nietzsche has slipped into Kierkegaard's spot in the ante-room—but we can leave that for another time. What is happening here, as we wait in the hotel lobby, settling into our mechanized and digitized routines as we sink into the easy chair at the end of civilization? Philosophy, nonetheless, continues to happen and every event of philosophy—of which critique is one—is a *twist* and a *tropic turn*. What happens when we move from "US Patent #387571 A for a 'storm-door structure'" to the "door of the world is a revolving door"? In part, as a "cultural paradigm for metropolitan modernity, Kracauer's hotel lobby embodies a complex logic by which the nomadic, smooth space of ad-

54 Roman Mars, "Why Don't People Use Revolving Doors?," *Slate Magazine*, November 7, 2013, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_eye/2013/11/07/revolving_doors_why_don_t_we_use_them_more.html.

55 Gilles Deleuze, "On Kant: Synthesis and Time," *Lectures by Gilles Deleuze*, February 2007, <http://deleuzelectures.blogspot.com/2007/02/on-kant.html>.

vanced capital continues to call up nostalgic depth-effects through various forms of place-making. The constellation of detective, police, criminal, and city are all shifting.

Kracauer is not, like Kant, a great philosopher, but he does know how to write the art of cultural critique that attends to the surfaces of the everyday experience of mass culture and knows how to transcode genres. He knows that the detective novel—picked up at the station, the airport, or read on Kindle while nodding off to sleep—always says more than it looks as if it saying. It says our world in its material historicity and it speaks from the space of *noir*. The (non)concept of *noir* is the twist that characterizes not just a genre of literature and film, but the activity of language and of the world itself. The worlding of the world moves as a shadow-play that can never accede fully to clarity or a common sense of a *lumen naturale*, there is never a “transparent” *mimēsis*. Historicity, the movement of temporalization, ensures that the Kantian *a priori* categories are always warped, deflected, and refracted and we have to learn to bend our thinking, to torque and twist it, if we are to have any sense of learning an ethics of the encounter that steps beyond the diminution of reason that has become disconnected from the meaning of daily life. Kracauer can help us with that.

Things are bound to come to a bad end—a shot in the dark awaits us all—but let’s make the most of the experiment while we can. Let’s see if there’s an easy chair, a revolving door, a gumshoe, a thug, or a philosopher that might be read differently, sent off in other directions than the *telos* of the predictable that wraps up all the loose ends. Let’s see if the figure of the detective novel, as read by Kracauer, might cast us and the genre of the novel ahead of ourselves. Deal the cards, then. Deuces wild. Spin the chamber. The dynamic *chiaroscuro* of sociology, literature, and philosophy—and a bit of cash—are all being transposed on the bloodied streets of the world’s cities. This is the historical condition in which we, still, find ourselves, so let’s see what we might make of what might come.

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Objective Alienation: No ‘essentialism’, nowhere¹²

Lukas Meisner³

Abstract: Even if its’ right is no longer straightforwardly denied, the concept *alienation* remains under official suspicion today. This is due to its supposed background in metaphysical discourse – a background ‘derived’ from Marx’s early use of the term species being – which is accused of idealisations such as the ahistorical ‘true kernel’ of ‘human essence’. Beyond such allegations, the article shows why Marxian alienation is, if properly read, conceived neither ‘essentialistically’ nor metaphysically but – on the opposite – historically and materialistically. As a result, ‘alienation’ is not (as, say, in Rahel Jaeggi’s ‘reactualisation’) reducible to a subjective attitude or affect towards the world but was and remains

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- 1 “No essentialism, nowhere” refers to Christa Wolf’s book “Kein Ort, nirgends”. Next to the two reviewers, I would like to thank the feedback by Helen Akin, Helene Thaa, Mirela Ivanova, Marlen van den Ecker, and Christoph Henning, as it was expressed at a workshop on *Entfremdung* at the University of Basel, 26-27th of May 2022. By ‘essentialism’, I refer to an *ahistorical* and *static* account of (human) essence (‘Wesen’) – hence, I follow the way Jaeggi (and other postmodernists) use the term (often in a strawman-version). As Henning and Ivanova stress, this understanding of ‘essentialism’ is already intrinsically problematic since (the) ‘essence’ (of human beings) can explicitly be understood *as historical and processual*. In that sense, it may be argued that non-‘essentialist’ theorisations of ‘essence’ are well possible. See, f.e., Christoph Henning, *Freiheit, Gleichheit, Entfaltung: Die politische Philosophie des Perfektionismus* (Frankfurt/ Main: Campus, 2015).
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a precise description of this world as an objective societal reality. Even more, with an update of the concept *objective alienation*, alienated labour can be shown to result – in the long run – in *alienated consumption* as well as in an alienation from ‘nature’ and from ‘life’. Only with a profound understanding of objective alienation, finally, can the phenomenologically denotable subjective alienation be *explained* as well – instead of only being *described*.

Introduction

Even if its’ right is no longer straightforwardly denied, the concept ‘alienation’ remains under official suspicion today. This is due to its supposed background in metaphysical discourse – a background ‘derived’ from Marx’s early use of the term ‘species being’ – which is accused of idealisations such as the ahistorical ‘true kernel’ of ‘human essence’. In the Frankfurt School tradition, Rahel Jaeggi’s recent ‘reactualisation’ of the term justified its conceptual transformation so far off from its radical former meanings that it cannot but be described as a domestication of the concept. Against this domestication, I show that Marx’s theorisation of alienation is under attack, in fact, due to a stark misunderstanding of his basic approach. More precisely, I demonstrate why Marxian ‘alienation’ is, if properly read, conceived neither ‘essentialistically’ nor metaphysically but – on the opposite – historically and materialistically. As a result, ‘alienation’ is not reducible to a subjective attitude or affect towards the world but was and remains a precise description for this world as an objective societal reality. Indeed, Marxian ‘alienation’ and Marxian ‘exploitation’ are closely related analytical tools for an understanding of the political economy of capitalism⁴ – which does not confine itself to a narrowly conceived ‘differentiated economic sphere’. With such a non-domesticating update of the concept of objective alienation, then, alienated labour can be shown to result, in the long run, in alienated consumption as well as in an alienation from ‘nature’ and from ‘life’. I will prove that these updated forms of alienation do not posit the alienation from any romanticised abstract ideal of lost origins but, rather, refer to an alienation from the very concrete conditions of possibility

4 So that – which is only a side effect – ‘social’ and ‘artistic critique’ cannot be separated from each other in the first place.

of human survival and living. Only with an understanding of this objective alienation, finally, can the phenomenologically denotable subjective alienation be explained as well, instead of only being described.

1. Sketching the roots of *alienation*: From Rousseau to Marx

The first outspoken theorisation of alienation can be found in the (early) work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For him, alienation happens *in structural societal form* as the alienation of

- 'true being' vis-a-vis mere appearance
- individual authenticity vis-a-vis social distinction, role play and being-persona (mask)
- self-will vis-a-vis public opinion and common sense
- the 'depth' of 'naturalness' vis-a-vis artificial superficiality
- self-love (*amour de soi*) vis-a-vis the comparisons, competitions, and insufficiencies of less narcissistic than heteronomous vanities (*amour propre*)
- equality among humans vis-a-vis private property and coerced labour.⁵

To put it in a nutshell, Rousseau's theory of alienation is a critique of appearance, social distinction, common sense (*opinion*), superficiality, comparison, heteronomy, and inequality as alienating tendencies in modern societies. As such, it is equally a critique of the structural alienations of competition, meritocracy, and their multiple pressures to perform. Today, it can ideally be adopted as a lens to read consumerism including conspicuous consumption (Veblen), and the logic of status including the wide spectrum of violence through symbolical capital (Bourdieu).⁶ More generally, Rousseau's work shows that it makes perfect sense to argue against

5 Cf. especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

6 This Rousseauian perspective – of inner-directed vs. other-directed social character – was developed for the emerging post-war consumerism in David Riesman (et al.), *The Lonely Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character. Abridged and Revised Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

the capitalistically tailored *mission civilisatrice* of progressivism and urbanisation *due to* – and not *despite of* – being for a realisation of freedom and equality as one and the same demand. The idea that self-determination and self-realisation belong together, and that we are alienated from them without a society conducive to both at the same time, is the leading premise throughout Rousseau’s oeuvre. It can be used not the least against today’s *ideologies* of self that privatise and thus sabotage (and alienate from) ideals of intersubjective authenticity and social individuality.

Following the standard history of philosophy, it would be logical to take a step to Hegel after Rousseau before getting to the young Hegelians. Yet, in this essay, I do not consider Hegel’s ‘Entfremdung’ as part of a Critical Theory of alienation. This is because, in Hegel, *Entfremdung* (not sufficiently distinguished, say, from *Entäußerung* and *Vergegenständlichung*) serves not as a historically specific relation but as *the* necessary or (onto-)logical structure of self-consciousness – which always needs to objectify itself in-order to know itself. Unlike Hegel, then, it is the young Hegelians – from Feuerbach to Moses Hess and Bruno Bauer – who criticise religion as an exemplar of the “self-alienation of human essence”⁷. According to this critique of religious alienation, humans ‘objectify’ themselves in God, yet only to forget about this objectification, which is the precondition of worshipping one’s own object as if it were a primordial subject. In Feuerbach, humans alienate themselves from themselves by first projecting their wishes, desires and fears unto God, and then identifying their own projections as realities to bow down in front of. Alienation, here, is approximated to *inversion*. Whereas in the alienated logos of theology, God created humans, it is the other way around within Feuerbach’s anthropologisation. Before they could pray to him, humans had to create God to begin with – and they did so in their own idealised image. This understanding of religion as *self-alienation of a human product (God) from human producers* is crucial also for another young Hegelian – namely, for Karl Marx.

7 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), 76: “Selbstentfremdung des menschlichen Wesens”. The following short exposition of Feuerbach’s basic idea is taken mainly from this major work of his.

The inversion in which a *product gains power over the producer*, forcing her to (*re-*)produce her very own domination, simultaneously hiding the (*re-*)*producedness* of this domination, is precisely the kind of alienation Marx lays bare in the capitalist economy. Here, however, the new 'God' is capital (or accumulated dead labour), which increasingly dominates (living) labour (and living beings).⁸ Hence, by 'putting Feuerbach from head to toes' – by radicalising his *anthropologisation of theology* qua a *sociologisation of anthropology* – Marx deconstructs the projection of God-like capacities unto capital, including the theodicy of the spontaneous self-regulation of markets⁹, and the quasi-tragic reproduction of capitalism as if it were a super-power outside of humans' hands.

Yet, the 'God' of capital, unlike that of other religions, does not remain only in the *heads* of the people. Rather, it 'incarnates' on earth as 'real abstraction': as a real relation between humans and their own (sur-) real organisation of society. Capital's 'religion', in this sense, is *material, immanent, or secular*.¹⁰ Despite lacking in meaning and purpose, it nevertheless is more and other than mere illusion. Under the regime of capital, what becomes a *fact* is that humans no longer have their time and work at their own disposal, since they have-to sell themselves to survive – mostly by getting some kind of compensation for their commodified labour on competitive markets. The more humans work in capitalist relations, however, the less they are in control of what they (*re-*)produce and its resulting economic dynamics. Still, the realities of capital, commodities and markets are not just subjective reactions to the world as it is, but

8 Cf. Harald Schliwa, "Entfremdung als Ausdruck nichtbeherrschter Vergesellschaftung", in Peter Hehr, *Zum Inhalt und zur Funktion des Entfremdungsbegriffs bei Karl Marx* (Berlin (GDR): Thematische Information und Dokumentation Reihe B, Heft 50, 1985), 62-67, here p. 64: "Der Begriff der Entfremdung erfaßt die Umwandlung der im gesellschaftlichen Arbeitsprozeß hervorgebrachten sozialen Macht in eine die Produzenten beherrschende Macht".

9 Cf. on the theodicy as economics Joseph Vogl, *Das seltsame Überleben der Theodizee in der Ökonomie*, presentation given the 7/7/2016 at the HU Berlin.

10 For this argument in more detail, see Lukas Meisner, "Beyond capitalism as religion: Disenchanted modernization for a radicalized project of modernity", in *Platypus Review*, 145 (2022a), online, no page count.

an objective transformation of this world itself – in these realities' own image. That is, Feuerbach's 'self-alienation', here, is applied by Marx to socio-historical phenomena. Alienation is demonstrated to have both a subjective and an objective side, as I will show later on.

2. Denying *alienation*: six ways

Although Marx showed why alienation is an objective condition of societal organisation, the reality of alienation gets denied since long – mainly, but not only, along the lines of reducing its objectivity to subjective sentiments. In fact, the objective Marxian account of alienation got denied from a multiple of backgrounds over the last decades.¹¹ There are (at least) six (often intertwined) ways of denying Marxian 'alienation' its right, either as a concept, or as a specific way of using this concept, or as a reality:

- (1) *Ontological negation*: it denies the existence of alienation on ontological grounds. The argument for such denial is that, since there *can be* no authentic self in the first place, there *can be* no alienated – as 'inauthentic' – self either.¹² In Foucauldian manner, the wish for authenticity, autonomy and subjectivity is claimed to be an *epistemic illusion*, until the hopes for a non-alienated life become (dangerous) illusions as well (uniting *humanism* with the critical *humanities*). The term 'alienation', here, is seen as nothing but as an 'essentialist' fraud.
- (2) *Anthropological necessitation*: it denies that a non-alienated human (or humanity) *could ever not exist*, so that the *human* condition is a condition of *alienation*. Arguments for this necessitation are, for example, that human beings are always already 'existentially' *external* or 'ex-centric' to themselves, and thus never 'at home' or 'centred' in

11 There is no space, here, to reflect on the (political) reasons of this bisection, and the concomitant denials; a convincing explanation is given by Chris Yuill, "Forgetting and remembering alienation theory", in *History of the Human Sciences*, 24(2) (2011), 103-119.

12 In fact, this is one of the main arguments underlying Jaeggi's redefinition, see Rahel Jaeggi, *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems. Mit einem neuen Nachwort* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2016).

themselves.¹³ Another version along the same lines is the thesis that it is only 'wearing masks' (becoming-*persona*) which makes humans truly human (becoming-*persons*). This is because the human as a political animal is supposed to be nothing without the public of the polis, whose eyes are always constructing *personae* (masks), behind which the 'human' is no other than an animal.¹⁴

- (3) *Moral re-evaluation*: it denies that alienation is to be judged as a bad thing whatsoever – or at least not as an unambivalently bad thing. There are varied versions of this re-evaluation, in which 'alienation' becomes something more or less positive. For example, alienation is said to bring *more* freedom instead of less¹⁵, or to make possible the *realisation* of self instead of its derealisation (Marx's *Entwirklichung*).¹⁶ In this re-evaluation, it is helpful to redefine 'alienation' as simply meaning to 'get into contact with the alien' – which has nothing to do with Marx's usage of the term but goes back to a (Hegelian?) confusion of (capitalist) *Entfremdung* with (Brechtian) *Verfremdung*.¹⁷ Still,

13 The classic on this is Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 1975).

14 This necessitation is developed in most liberalisms, f.e. in Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), second chapter; and reformulated in many postmodernisms, f.e. in Byung-Chul Han, *Transparenzgesellschaft* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 57 ff. For a critique, see exemplarily Georg Lukács in his 1967 *Vorwort* in Georg Lukács, *Frühschriften II. Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2013), 26: "Für die bürgerlich-philosophische Kulturkritik, es genügt an Heidegger zu denken, war es sehr naheliegend, die gesellschaftliche Kritik in eine rein philosophische zu sublimieren, aus der dem Wesen nach gesellschaftlichen Entfremdung eine ewige ‚condition humaine‘ zu machen, um einen später entstandenen Terminus zu gebrauchen."

15 For the classic, see Georg Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes. Gesamtausgabe. Band 6* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), fourth chapter.

16 Cf. Gavin Rae, "Alienation, authenticity and the self", in *History of the Human Sciences*, 23(4) (2010), 21-36.

17 Along these lines, Stakemaier's – perhaps least possible Marxian – understanding of alienation is "treating alienation not so much as an original sin but rather as a constitutive privilege [!]", see Kerstin Stakemaier, *The Aesthetic Properties of Alienation*, a presentation at *Antarctica. An Exhibition on Alienation* in *Kunsthalle Wien*, 30/8/2020.

when redefined as the *opposite of xenophobia*, alienation no longer is a problem but the very solution.¹⁸

- (4) *Historicist antiquation*: it denies the concept of alienation its' relevance for today, since it is suggested to be outmoded, old-fashioned, and/or inadequate for the present age. This point is most often put forward by stating that the concept of alienation, officially taken from the factory age of Manchester capitalism, could no longer hold for new modes of capitalist accumulation. Interestingly, that view was developed both from within the conditions of real-socialist societies¹⁹, and from within the neo-capitalist creative, lean, and team labour conditions of Toyotism (including its hedonistic consumerisms).²⁰
- (5) *Psychologist privatisation*: it denies alienation's objectivity by inferring the theory of alienation from the 'alienated feelings' of marginalised intellectuals. In this privatisation, 'alienation' is reduced to individuals' theorising reaction against a marginalising society. Alienation, here, is not embedded in society for real, but only a *psychological resentment* in certain people, especially in academics.²¹
- (6) *Academic (philosophic) prohibition*: it denies the concept 'alienation' its philosophical dignity or legitimation, proposing that under new university fashions (analytic philosophy, pragmatism, postmodernism²²

18 Against Stakemaier, Adorno still got it right when he reminded us that "Nur Fremdheit ist das Gegengift gegen Entfremdung", Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 4* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 103.

19 Cf. Armin Trebeß, *Entfremdung und Ästhetik. Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Studie und eine Analyse der ästhetischen Theorie Wolfgang Heises* (Stuttgart/ Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2001), XIV, who writes of "die Tabuisierung des Begriffs [der Entfremdung], wie sie für die Länder des realen Sozialismus charakteristisch war."

20 Cf. for this Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia. Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

21 For this characterisation, see Peter V. Zima, *Entfremdung. Pathologien der postmodernen Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 2014), 31.

22 For a clearer understanding of 'postmodernism' and a historical-sociological genealogy of its genesis and persistence, see Lukas Meisner, "The Political Economy of Postmodernism and the Spirit of Post-Bourgeois Capitalism", in *Journal of the New Centre for Research & Practice* (2021), online, no page count.

etc.), the term as it was formerly known can no longer be defended in intelligible ways. Aligning with the common sense of academic booms and the newest vogue in intellectualist thought styles, 'alienation' is claimed to be in-need of complete redefinition, if it is granted the right to survive at all.²³

All in all, then, denying Marxian 'alienation' is the shared characteristic of many conservative, liberal, communitarian and postmodernist thinkers. Arguably, most of these denials share a premise that reduces the objectivity of alienation to subjective, moral, philosophical, psychological, or academic sentiments. Interestingly, the best-known Frankfurt School attempt at a 'reactualisation' of the term results in a similar denial of its once Rousseauian, Feuerbachian, and Marxian content. In this account, as well, alienation gets reduced to a mostly subjective issue.

3. Domesticating 'alienation': Jaeggi's conceptual transformation

Whereas the term alienation was broadly missing in the social theories of the 1980s and 1990s, even when it finally re-emerged in the Frankfurt School of the 2000s, it did so in a fashion far off from its Marxian roots.²⁴ With this chapter, I focus on Rahel Jaeggi's 'reactualisation' because she, at least in the German-speaking world, is traded as today's hegemonic interpreter of the term. Astonishingly, the main reason Jaeggi gives to dismiss the *Marxian* theory of alienation is that it would – quite obviously – contradict liberalist and postmodernist positions, or analytical and post-

23 As will be seen in the next chapter, this is – most prominently – Jaeggi's position.

24 As Adrian Wilding, "Rahel Jaeggi. Kritik von Lebensformen. Review", at *Marx & Philosophy* (13/2/2016), online, no page count, summarises Jaeggi's 'reactualisation' of alienation: "what appeared at first sight as a laudable revival of a key idea turned out to cede extensive ground to Marx's liberal and postmodern critics." He continues: "A straw man ('essentialism') has provided the foil for a quite etiolated and sociological image of unalienated life." Alternative reactualisations to Jaeggi's closer to Marx include Barry Padgett, *Marx and Alienation in Contemporary Society* (New York/ London: continuum, 2007); and Jerome Braun (et al.), *Alienation and the Carnivalization of Society* (London: Routledge, 2012).

structuralist philosophies.²⁵ This approach to an ‘update’ is particularly problematic if one remembers the “post-structuralist laudations of alienation as [...] an unhuman condition that can [and should] *be enhanced and radicalized*.”²⁶ To a certain extent, Jaeggi’s dismissal of Marxian alienation already follows from her closeness to Althusser’s structuralist critique of early Marx²⁷, since – after all – “the project Althusser” consisted in “definitely disposing of the concept of alienation.”²⁸ The resulting ‘theory of alienation’, then, either denies alienation a negative evaluation (liberalism) or gives it an ontological status (postmodernism) – until “alienation becomes constitutive and inevitable”²⁹. Hence, the way Jaeggi ‘reactualises’ the concept is by getting rid of its Marxian contents, its analysis of political economy, its critique of capitalism, and its main problems: from labour to the commodity. If this is not a wholehearted “‘farewell’ to the [former] concept”³⁰, it is at least an almost complete redefinition of it which comes close to the abolition of its objective contents.³¹ Let us look more closely into the reasons for and ways of this ‘abolishing rescue’.

The four main arguments Jaeggi offers for her reactualisation are the following:

“[1] The use of the concept of alienation had become too inflationary in the times of its boom, [2] its philosophical foundations seem too outdated in the age of ‘postmodernism’, [3] its political consequences seem too questionable in the age of ‘political liberalism’ – and perhaps, [4] the critique of alien-

25 Cf. Jaeggi, op. cit., 51-57.

26 Keti Chukhrov, “Desiring Alienation in Capitalism. Zeal to De-alienate in Socialism”, in *Crisis & Critique*, 4:2 (2017), 132-152, here 142, my emphasis.

27 On her closeness to Althusser, see Jaeggi, op. cit., 52.

28 Étienne Balibar, “Strukturelle Kausalität, Überdetermination und Antagonismus”, in Henning Böke (et al.), *Denk-Prozesse nach Althusser* (Hamburg: Argument, 1994), 36.

29 Jaeggi, op. cit., 56: “Entfremdung wird konstitutiv und unausweichlich”.

30 Ibid., 317: “Verabschiedung’ des Begriffs”.

31 Cf. also Armin Kuhn, “Jaeggi, Rahel, Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems. Rezension”, in *Das Argument*, 268, 48. Jahrgang, Heft 516/2006, 250-251.

ation also seems too hopeless under the sign of victorious capitalism.³²

These are wondrous considerations. Let us go through them step by step. To start with, one can at least argue that if a concept was used inflationary once (1), this may be less *caveat against its usage* than *proof of its relevance* – as much as a call for its stricter re-theorisation (instead of its utter redefinition). Moreover, that the 'philosophical foundations' of the theory of alienation appear as antiquated in postmodern times (2), and that its 'political consequences' are outrageous for political liberalism (3), cannot be counted as *arguments at all* if one does not identify either with the claims of postmodernism and/ or of liberalism (which, arguably, belong together). Last but not least, the fatalism bowing down to capital's winner-takes-it-all-mentality after 1989 (4) is, if anything, reason to return to the category of alienation instead of removing it. Jaeggi, however, instead of reading 1989's 'end of history' as a call for a *critique* of alienation that puts capitalism at its very centre seems to prefer to surrender to the alienations of capitalism, namely of a capitalism that even lost its systemic competitor. Consequentially, Jaeggi does not draw the conclusion that the concept of alienation needs an update for today's capitalism which keeps the radical edge of the term but that *its very substance needs to be altered* via its 'reactualisation', "conceptual transformation"³³, or philosophical redefinition.

The resulting 'reactualised' version of alienation, then, comes down to the abstract formula of a 'relation of a lack in relations'³⁴, which points to people's insufficient appropriation of the social world. That formula serves well as a psychologisation, individualisation and subjectivation of a formerly sociological concept. Whether it is the *feeling* of powerlessness vis-a-

32 Jaeggi, op. cit., 11: "Zu inflationär war der Gebrauch des Entfremdungsbegriffs in den Zeiten seiner Hochkonjunktur geworden, zu überkommen scheinen seine philosophischen Grundlagen im Zeitalter der ‚Postmoderne‘, zu fragwürdig seine politischen Konsequenzen in dem des ‚politischen Liberalismus‘ – und vielleicht auch zu aussichtslos das Anliegen der Entfremdungskritik im Zeichen des siegreichen Kapitalismus."

33 Ibid., 13: "begrifflich transformiert".

34 78 f.: "Beziehung der Beziehungslosigkeit".

vis *one's own* earlier decisions; the deficient *self*-appropriation of one's social role; the problem of subjectivist *self*-alienation; or the *sentiment* of an *individual's felt* indifference³⁵, all of Jaeggi's 'phenomena' of alienation regard *inner conducts to* and *interpretations of* the world – instead of this world's societal structures. As a result, *not* being alienated signifies "a specific way of *relating* to oneself and *to the conditions in which one lives* and by which one is *determined* (!) – of being able to *appropriate* them."³⁶ Yet, arguably, if it is the case, thus, that the conditions in which one lives *determine* one, then one's scope of possible actions against alienation is narrowed down to *identifying* with these given conditions. Consequentially, for Jaeggi, to dis-alienate mainly means to "learn", "know", "internalise", "assimilate"³⁷, "understand"³⁸, take an "attitude"³⁹ to, "coherently interpret"⁴⁰ and "get into a relation with"⁴¹ these very conditions. Hence, instead of transforming societal conditions, getting beyond alienation with Jaeggi seems to come down to be able to *relate*, *assimilate*, *adapt to* and *appropriate*⁴² them in-order to "function"⁴³ within and "integrate"⁴⁴ into them. Inasmuch as it is more about *reinterpretation* in theory than about *transformation* in practice, however, Jaeggi's 'appropriation' is quasi-idealistic. Even more, if its alternative to alienation is the appropriation of the institutionalised world *as it is*, it almost approximates right-Hegelianism's affirmation of given *Sittlichkeit*.⁴⁵

35 See 80-212.

36 58, original emphasis: "eine bestimmte Art, sich zu sich und den Verhältnissen, in denen man lebt und von denen man bestimmt ist [...], in *Beziehung zu setzen*, sie sich *aneignen* zu können."

37 64 f.: "Lernen", "Einsicht", "Assimilation", "Verinnerlichung".

38 78: "begreifen".

39 100.

40 176.

41 299.

42 64: "aneignend zu Eigen machen".

43 180.

44 Cf. 215, who speaks of a "Mangel an [...] Integrationsfähigkeit".

45 Cf. 14.

The latter danger gets most obvious when Jaeggi deals with the issue of social roles. For her, it is not only that roles can only "be reinterpreted but not reinvented (!)"⁴⁶. Even more, for Jaeggi, one is *never more than the role one is playing* "inasmuch as we, anyway, always (!) exist in roles"⁴⁷. Here, a postmodern bias *ontologises* what liberalism just *devalued normatively*: authenticity is not only seen as politically dangerous (liberalism) but as ontologically impossible (postmodernism).⁴⁸ Against any prohibited "relapse into an ideal of authenticity"⁴⁹, inner and outer space, oneself and one's role become one and the same – leaving only a 'become who you are' of the most one-dimensional kind. For the postmodernist Jaeggi – in direct contradiction to the founder of the theory of alienation, Rousseau –, "there is no 'truth of the self' beyond its expressions"⁵⁰, since there "is nothing (!) behind the roles"⁵¹. Instead, appearance and being, interior and exterior, will and act, self and institution are *identified* with each other. In the eyes of Jaeggi, nobody was ever more than an in-between of the divisions of public labour, which effectively *universalises acting* as if it were the only *being* possible: "True humaneness is always performed."⁵² Jaeggi, thus, *inverts* (read: *alienates*) the Rousseauian understanding of alienation – for which (many) roles are alienating – by stating that "the individual alienates herself from herself *by* (!) alienating herself *from* her roles (!)"⁵³. Hence, the problem no longer are alienating roles but a lack in

46 66: "lassen sich umdeuten, aber nicht neu erfinden".

47 114: "sofern wir ohnehin immer in Rollen existieren".

48 Along the liberalist-postmodernist bias, it is claimed either that the overcoming of alienation is more dangerous than alienation itself (by being close to politically problematic ideas of 'reconciliation' and 'harmony': liberalist bias), or that (Rousseauian-Marxian, or structural-sociological) alienation is not even possible at all (since there is no state of authenticity or transparency in the first place: postmodernist bias).

49 124: "Rückfall in ein Authentizitätsideal".

50 74: "Es gibt keine ‚Wahrheit des Selbst‘ jenseits seiner Äußerungen."

51 117; see also 76, 113.

52 136: "Wahres Menschsein ist immer gespielt."

53 My emphases, 299.

identification with them. Consequentially, every space *outside* of “social expectations and roles” becomes utterly “fictitious”⁵⁴.

For Jaeggi, there is no self whatsoever – where self once was, there emptiness shall be: an emptiness as an interface (or shell) of acts, structures, roles, performances, and institutions.⁵⁵ The paradoxical result is that the only ‘alienation’ left, for Jaeggi, is *self*-alienation, yet a self-alienation *without the existence of selves*. Similarly, the paradoxical solution she offers is *self*-determination and *self*-realisation without, however, any self to determine or to realise: a self-appropriation as the ‘self-less’ process of appropriating the given.⁵⁶ Yet, what is denied in postmodern fashion when the Rousseauian concept of self is denied is also the “romantic” concept of a “self that can resist and oppose”⁵⁷, a “resisting individuality”⁵⁸ – the potential of a *transcending interior*. What is denied in the *immanentism* of institutions and their roles⁵⁹ is the ‘substance’ of self less as a self-transparent *essence* but as a non-identity of *persistence* and *resistance*: the potential of a latent, self-integrated, particular self beyond mere (role-)acting.⁶⁰ Equally denied is the potential of a *socius* that is not mediated through role pressures but through more non-identifying or *queer* forms of socialisation.

Importantly, this denial of *Rousseauian* alienation also leads into a denial of *Marxian* alienation. The examples Jaeggi gives of alienation are unex-

54 Ibid.: “Das Individuum entfremdet sich von sich, *indem* es sich von seinen Rollen entfremdet”. By contrast Zima, op. cit., 138, makes clear: “,Selbstentfremdung’ ist alles andere als eine Leerformel, weil das Wort *die Verleugnung der eigenen Veranlagung und den Verzicht auf den eigenen Lebensentwurf* bezeichnet.”

55 In this sense, the postmodernist Jaeggi does not get rid of the corresponding shell when she gets rid of the “kernel of self” (Jaeggi, op. cit., 219 ff.), but instead transforms everything into a shell, including the self.

56 Cf. *ibid.*, 275 ff. (In his *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche understands “Selbstlosigkeit” not as altruism but as the absence of self: ‘self-lessness’ as lack in oneself, as afraid of being one self, in fear of saying ‘this is me’.)

57 Lionel Trilling quoted in Jaeggi, op. cit., 251.

58 Jonathan Glover quoted in *ibid.*, 253.

59 Cf. *ibid.*, 258 ff.

60 Cf. for that esp. 144-186.

ceptionally taken from "privileged-middle-class"⁶¹ backgrounds and "academic sensitivities"⁶² – from the "young editor" to the "banker", from the "young scientist" to the "financial consultant", from the "journalist" to the "professor of linguistics" (himself taken from an academic's novel).⁶³ Since for Jaeggi, the point of dis-alienation is that of an "individual appropriation" of a "pre-giveness"⁶⁴, alienation gets privatised into a personal business of adaptation to that very given. At this point, the central question becomes whether one can be "open" (*erfahrungsoffen*), "connectable" (*anschlussfähig*), "flexible" (*beweglich*)⁶⁵, "fluid" (*verflüssigt*)⁶⁶ enough to integrate oneself into the constantly changing roles and institutions. Appropriation, here, means to "dispose of oneself"⁶⁷ or to be in command, first and foremost, *over oneself*, so that appropriation becomes adoptability. Yet, if the 'end of alienation' is achieved as soon as one is adaptive, flexible, adjustable, fluid or "candyfloss"⁶⁸ enough, then the conceptual transformation of alienation comes close to an *inversion of its Marxian meaning* – and thus to the almost complete *domestication* of its once critical potential.

To be fair, in the 2016 afterword, Jaeggi openly admits that in her book from the early 2000s, "the analysis of the social conditions of phenomena of alienation has remained unperformed"⁶⁹. Since, meanwhile, the neo-liberal hegemony is in crisis, "alienation-theoretical social critique"⁷⁰ has become academically acceptable again. Consequentially, unlike in the 300

61 Thomas Klikauer, "Rahel Jaeggi's Alienation. A review", at *Marx & Philosophy* (28/10/2014), online, no page count.

62 Christoph Henning, *Theorien der Entfremdung zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2015), 188: "akademische Befindlichkeiten".

63 Jaeggi, op. cit., 71 f., 81, 104, 187.

64 Ibid., 128: "individuelle Aneignung"; "Vorgegebenheit".

65 133.

66 296.

67 77: "über sich verfügt".

68 249: "Gespinst aus Zuckerwatte".

69 325: "die Analyse der sozialen Bedingungen von Entfremdungserscheinungen unausgeführt geblieben [ist]".

70 326: "Entfremdungstheoretische Gesellschaftskritik".

pages before, Jaeggi now *is* concerned about the “structures and institutions”⁷¹ of alienation. Also, it is no longer the subjects that fail in their appropriation of the world to “feel at home” but now, it *is the world itself* which is no longer *inhabitable* as “home”⁷². Unfortunately, Jaeggi’s belated insights remain without any mediation with the rest of her book. After all, society as a whole does not seem to be too damaging for Jaeggi. Even in 2016, for her, the “logic of the market” is friendly enough to only “offer (!)” (*anbietet*) instrumental modes of relation⁷³; the logic of consumption may only be “accused (!)” (*nachsagen*) of fostering alienated forms of self-reference⁷⁴; and the logistics of structures and institutions may, at least, “limit painfully” the individual life of actors – but only “under certain conditions (!)” (*unter Umständen*)⁷⁵. Hence, still in 2016, it is Jaeggi’s main question whether one’s deeds are “connectable” (*anschlussfähig*) to their “practical conditions”⁷⁶ – so that her original diagnosis remains basically the same.

To summarise, Jaeggi’s transformation of the concept of alienation – its “formal turn”⁷⁷ – has domesticated it at the core. As has been shown, this domestication of ‘alienation’ was undertaken not only by individualising and psychologising, liberalising and postmodernising the concept, thus taking away its clear anticapitalist content known from Marx. Even more, in the process of domestication, the concept was emptied of the horizon of a truly non-alienated society in which people can be more and other than roles, namely recognised and affirmed in their non-identity – as in Rousseau’s imaginary.

71 327.

72 329.

73 330.

74 329 f.

75 327.

76 322.

77 *Ibid.*: “formale Wendung”.

4. Reactualising 'alienation' as heterocracy: *Entfremdung* as *Fremdherrschaft*⁷⁸

Next to Jaeggi, there are two other recent 'reactualisations' of alienation in Critical Theory, one by Hartmut Rosa and one by Rainer Forst. Whereas Rosa's basic account remains close to Jaeggi's – mainly exchanging her de-alienating ideal of *Aneignung* (appropriation) with the less 'disposing' (*verfügende*⁷⁹) ideal of *Anverwandlung*⁸⁰ –, Forst proposes an understanding of alienation which is closer to Marx. With him and beyond Jaeggi, it may be said that the question of alienation is not whether one identifies with what one is doing (f.e. one's social roles) or what is around oneself (f.e. social institutions), but whether they are – at least potentially, and gradually – *self-determined* in democratic manner. Along these lines, Forst conceptualises "alienation as a loss or denial of autonomy, thus not relying, as is usually the case in alienation theory, on a particular notion of authenticity"⁸¹. His way to get out of the Rousseauian connection between alienation

78 It should be clarified that I do not intend to theorise *all* alienation, not even *all objective alienation*, only as a lack in autonomy; nor *all* lack in autonomy – immediately – as stemming from capitalism. Rather, I concentrate on these aspects especially to highlight the *objective* character of alienation, to defend it against the accusations of being 'essentialist' – as the term is used, for example, by Rahel Jaeggi –, and to develop a Critical Theory of Political Autonomy as a Critical Theory of, against, and beyond capitalism. In short, the intention of this essay is not to develop a global theory of all forms of alienation possible but to flesh out the Marxian understanding of alienation as a most basic analytical tool of the critique of (material) ideology at the methodological heart of Critical Theory. I am thankful to Hartmut Rosa for stressing the need of this clarification. Still, the thesis of the essay *is* that from alienated labour also follow *most other forms* of alienation under capitalism – to be found as much *within* the sphere of production as *beyond* it.

79 Cf. Hartmut Rosa, *Unverfügbarkeit* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2020).

80 See Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung und Entfremdung. Entwurf einer kritischen Theorie spätmoderner Zeitlichkeit* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2013).

81 Rainer Forst, "Noumenal Alienation: Rousseau, Kant and Marx on the Dialectics of Self-Determination", in *Kantian Review*, 22(4) (2017), 523-551. I quote the text from a PDF-version downloaded from Forst's website at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt/ Main, 2.

and inauthenticity, thus, is not via a postmodernised ‘right-Hegelianism’ but via a left-Republican Kantianism: “introducing democracy as a major practice of overcoming alienation”⁸². ‘Alienation’, for him, is not to be read as an alienation from some eternal metaphysical kernel of humans but as a structural lack in democratic self-determination. Indeed, “the theme of *Entfremdung* in Marx must never be reduced to an ethical issue of being ‘truly’ and authentically oneself, as it first and foremost addresses relations of *Knechtung*, that is, of social domination in the form of economic exploitation and general political and legal oppression.”⁸³

Importantly, such an egalitarian Republicanism goes way beyond liberalism because it understands (radical) democracy as a *dialectics of private and public autonomy*. Here, the ‘self’ in this self-determination is the inter-subjectivity of a *political autonomy*⁸⁴ whose “individual and collective self-determination”⁸⁵ cannot be split from but are mediated through each other. Individual and collective self-determination need to be thought together because “no true personal independence is possible without true commonality in an order of self-government.”⁸⁶ Put differently, individual and collective self-determination are in a dialectics since democratic societies cannot do without taking into account their social individuals’ say, whereas individualisation itself is a social process which is impossible to happen as the isolated endeavour of a solipsist monad – thus being dependent on an anti-isolationist societal framework conducive to its development. Without public autonomy, thus, there is no private autonomy either; and without political autonomy, there is no autonomy at all. This approach is not invented by Forst but goes back at least to Marx’s *Alienated Labour*. In Forst’s words:

82 Ibid., 4.

83 18.

84 Cf. f.e. Rainer Forst, *Das Recht auf Rechtfertigung. Elemente einer konstruktivistischen Theorie der Gerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2010a); Rainer Forst, *Kritik der Rechtfertigungsverhältnisse. Perspektiven einer kritischen Theorie der Politik* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2010b).

85 Forst 2017, op. cit., 3.

86 Ibid., 14.

"Her [the worker's] products, production itself, her potentials as a free subject and, finally, other human beings all appear to her as part of an 'alien power' [Marx], which shows that, despite the ethical-teleological implications of the idea of the generic being, it is in particular the loss of collective autonomy that is the main feature of the condition of alienation: that individuals cannot be social beings together with others in a self-determining society."⁸⁷

Alienation, in this Marxian view, is a socio-economically induced *objective heterocracy*. Put differently: *Entfremdung* is to be read as structural *Fremdherrschaft*. The way to tackle such alienation as heterocracy is the inter-subjective democratisation of political autonomy which reclaims its own powers from the structures, mechanisms and dynamics conjured up by alienated forms of socialisation.

Yet, by merely demanding "radical critique, the public use of reason and sober social analysis"⁸⁸, alienation will not be abolished. This is because, pace Forst, alienation is *more than a moral, deontological or (re-)cognitive problem*: it is an economic, real-societal, objective phenomenon. In fact, Forst himself reminds us that alienation "is much more than a state of mind, as it refers to intersubjective relations, social structures and a whole social order"⁸⁹. Consequentially, the solution to alienation is necessarily one that includes collective decisions over realms that liberalist paradigms prohibit from democratic participation. The *res publicas* of a truly self-determined 'republic' includes not only public discourse but must be extended to the not-yet democratised sci-tech-economic com-

87 Rainer Forst, *Normativität und Macht. Zur Analyse sozialer Rechtfertigungsordnungen* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), 181 f.: "Seine [des Arbeiters] Produkte, die Produktion selbst, seine Potenziale als freies Subjekt und schließlich auch die anderen Menschen erscheinen ihm alle als Teil einer ,fremde[n] Macht' [Marx], was zeigt, dass es trotz der ethisch-teleologischen Implikationen der Idee des Gattungswesens insbesondere der Verlust der kollektiven Autonomie ist, der das Hauptmerkmal des Zustands der Entfremdung darstellt: dass Individuen nicht gemeinsam mit anderen gesellschaftliche Wesen in einer sich selbst bestimmenden Gesellschaft sein können."

88 Forst 2017, op. cit., 21.

89 Ibid., 22.

plex, encompassing also the reproductive functions of society. What is needed, in short, is *social and political autonomy*, which cannot be divided from each other, since both remain circumscribed as long as they do not include science, technology and the economy in their scope of application.⁹⁰ For such a view, however, one needs to leave Forst's Kantian Republicanism of political institutions too close to social democracy and return to a Marxian *socio-economic* overcoming of the heterocracy of capitalism and its apparatuses.

5. Defending Marxian 'alienation': Between 'alienated labour' and the 'alienation from life'

Whereas most of today's 'reactualisations' of alienation omit its objective dimension by one-dimensionally fleshing out its subjective side, in the Marxian account, there is an objective *and* a subjective form of alienation, and one cannot be understood without the other. One may also state that 'alienation' implies a relation of an objective *lack in autonomy* to a subjective *lack in meaning* – which are related due to the “constitutive connection between self-determination and self-realisation”⁹¹. Usually, alienation from the control over one's own life, and alienation from being-in-the-world more broadly, coincide.⁹² If one cannot act self-determined or according to one's needs, it also becomes hard to live a meaningful life with purpose among others who try to do the same, and thus recognise each other. Whereas the objective form of alienation as *Entfremdung* points towards heterocracy – or *Fremdherrschaft* –, its subjective form can point to the resulting feelings of powerlessness, overstrain, anxiety, depression or burnout, in which one feels as if 'not-being-at-home', 'alien' or 'estranged': *fremd*. Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdung*, from this angle,

90 For sure, the political should not be reduced to the state, as Forst is doing when calling Marx “apolitical”, see 20.

91 Jaeggi, op. cit., p. 46: “konstitutiven Zusammenhang von *Selbstbestimmung* und *Selbstverwirklichung*”.

92 For these two dimensions of alienation, see Robert Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom. The Factory Worker and his Industry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964).

then, may be described as an "Alienation of Alienation"⁹³, or as the conscious estrangement from the alienation one is living in. His *Verfremdung* is raising a subjective awareness – an anti-identifying disenchantment, or a *Befremdung* – of the objective *Fremdherrschaft* one is forced into.⁹⁴ In any case, the Marxian concept 'alienation' (*Entfremdung*) includes the subjective reaction or response to objective structures (*Befremdung*, *Fremdheit*, *Verfremdung*), yet it underlines these structures themselves (*Fremdherrschaft*). As such, alienation describes both, psychological-cultural 'effects' and societal-economic 'causes'.⁹⁵

In the remaining article, I will show why and how Marx's approach is still the best choice to understand both objective and subjective forms of alienation. I start with reading his concept of alienation along the lines of alienated *labour* to further elaborate on alienation's *objectivity* (a); next, I refute those critics who accuse Marx of being productivist, anthropocentric or 'essentialist' as *misreading* his early work (b); and finally, I demonstrate that today, the alienation of labour is equally an alienation of consumption and distribution, as much as an alienation from 'nature' and 'life' (c). This last point entails an *update* of Marx's *Alienated Labour* as an alternative to its domestication.

93 Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature. Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 178 f.

94 Many postmodernists and post-Marxists confuse these levels of *Entfremdung* and *Verfremdung*, *Fremdherrschaft* and *Fremde* – see f.e. op. cit., Kerstin Stake-meier. Yet, Brecht's estrangement (*Verfremdung*) alienates the actors from their alienated labour (*entfremdete Arbeit*), and it alienates the spectators from the theatre of alienation: its coldness, distortion and shock are not an end in itself (towards more alienation) but directed to make conscious (or *befremdlich*) the coldness, distortion and shock doctrine of reality (against and beyond alienation). This difference is especially important if one notes how Jaeggi's reactualisation of the term does not follow Brecht's estrangement against the people's identification with their roles and institutions, but on the opposite reconceptualises a successful identification with these roles as a successful overcoming of alienation itself. In this inversion (or alienation from the term 'alienation'), then, to end *Entfremdung* means to end *Verfremdung*.

95 Cf. Rae, op. cit., 28: "While the individual's subjective perception plays a part, alienation is not solely dependent on her or his subjective perception."

(a) The objectivity of alienated labour

In capitalist labour, the objectivity of alienation becomes most obvious as “an *actual* economic fact”⁹⁶: as structural heteronomy, or heterocracy. This objectivity of alienation is *not* to be confused with the process of *objectification* (*Vergegenständlichung*), which every labour necessarily undertakes. Whereas to objectify oneself remains, first and foremost, a realisation of oneself (a self-expression) in and as reality, alienation only happens if what one objectifies is outside of one’s control: only then, objectification appears as “as *loss of the object* and *object-bondage*”⁹⁷. Labour is objectively alienated not if it objectifies but if it and its objects are not in the ‘subjective hands’ of its labourers. Hence, alienation is not only about the failure to ‘(re-)appropriate’, ‘re-internalise’ or ‘return’ from what one has objectified⁹⁸ but it already is a *privation and privatisation* of the very *act of objectification*. Alienation comes at the *inception* of the process, not at its end: *it is when objectification is not self-determined that it becomes alienation*. Alienation is not only that one does not get back one’s products which one has produced for their consumption, but it is, first and foremost, that one *has-to produce* against one’s will what one does not need *due to the coercion of labour*.

At its base, the alienation of labour follows from coerced labour as a *forced selling* of one’s labour power as commodity, after which not only the fruit of one’s labour but *this labour itself* “belongs to another”⁹⁹, and is thus controlled by someone else. Marx famously distinguishes between four dimensions of alienated labour:

- (1) An alienation from the “act of production”¹⁰⁰, which may also be termed “active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of

96 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), 71.

97 Ibid.

98 This seems to be the one intuition that Jaeggi and Henning share.

99 Marx, *op. cit.*, 74.

100 Ibid., 73.

- alienation"¹⁰¹ or an "activity turned against"¹⁰² the one who is active.
- (2) An alienation from the products of labour, as a result of which the product of labour becomes "*an alien object exercising power*" over its producer as the "estrangement of the *thing*"¹⁰³.
 - (3) An alienation of *producers from other producers*, or of *society from the economy as a whole*: the total process of labour not being in the labourers' hands but being "private property"¹⁰⁴ as the "*means by which labor alienates itself*"¹⁰⁵.
 - (4) An alienation from 'nature', 'humanity', 'life', and consciousness at the same time¹⁰⁶ that naturalises alienation by alienating from the collective 'life-activity' of labour as a *conscious metabolism with nature* specific to humans. In its turn, humans get alienated also from their bodies, their preconditions, their time, and their mind – by ossifying the most basic division of labour between head and hand.

Hence, for Marx, the alienation of labour leads into a multi-dimensional totalisation of alienation in whose macro-societal outcome, alienated labour (re-)produces "*something alien*", a "*power independent of the producer*"¹⁰⁷, or "*an alien power*"¹⁰⁸. Here, alienated labour (re-)produces an external authority as 'alien power' vis-a-vis itself: "the more the worker spends h[er]self, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which [s]he creates over-against h[er]self"¹⁰⁹. Arguably, a lot of subjective alienation is the result of that most basic distortion: the labourer experiences her own "negation in the *alienated, objective* conditions of

101 74.

102 75.

103 Ibid., the first emphasis added.

104 81, in the original in italics.

105 Ibid.

106 Cf. 76.

107 71.

108 79; the latter being my emphasis.

109 72.

labour”¹¹⁰. Here, humans become means for capital as an end-in-itself instead of the economy being means for humans: “the more objects the worker produces [...] the more [s]he falls under the dominion of [her] product, capital.”¹¹¹ Capitalism as capital’s heterocracy is, at its very base, the self-alienation of its (re-)producers, or their (re-)production of their own heteronomy vis-a-vis capital (as dead labour). The ‘alien’ in alienation denotes “that the life which [the worker] has conferred on the object confronts h[er] as something *hostile and alien*.”¹¹² Alienation is the cause and the effect of a *heteronomous* organisation of the sci-tech-economic complex from which follows a *hostile* societal and natural world¹¹³: a world of antagonism, competition, and struggle – spellbound by a power that appears as alien.

For Marx, then, the problem of alienation is not only a problem of quantification, exchange value, homogenisation and indifference. Rather, it *also* is a problem of *exploitation*.¹¹⁴ Indeed, capitalist exploitation could not even *happen* without the capitalist alienation from one’s process of production, self-produced products, productive forces, and relations of production. Alienated labour – which may be said to start with the alienation from the means of production – results in the ‘alienation’ of the surplus value produced: this is, in exploitation. If classically Marxian ‘exploitation’ is about appropriating the surplus value from the labourer by paying less than the worth she created, then exploitation is only possible if work is alienated: if people do not decide together on what to produce but are forced to produce what somebody else wants them to, since they have nothing but their

110 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 175, my emphasis.

111 Marx, op. cit., 71.

112 Ibid., 72, my emphasis.

113 Cf. 75: “nature as an alien world antagonistically opposed to [the worker].”

114 Similarly, the problem of commodification is not only that everything becomes exchangeable and monetarised, but that the (re-)producedness of human relations becomes naturalised, and that human productivity is equipped with seemingly ‘supernatural’ qualities vis-a-vis a new human powerlessness.

labour power to sell in-order to survive. In this sense, exploitation follows from alienation. The labourer only owns her own labour power to sell it for someone else's privatised profit: under the exploitative conditions of alienated labour, the fruit of production gets substituted by a wage in which the surplus has disappeared. The alienation of labour is as objective as its exploitation: the former even is the precondition of the latter.

(b) Criticising the critiques:

No essentialism in *Alienated Labour*

It became part of the academic common sense after Althusser to see in Marx's *Alienated Labour* a romantic, Hegelian, metaphysical text. This is usually justified by pointing out Marx's usage of concepts taken from Feuerbach, such as 'species being', 'humanity' and 'nature', which are supposed to stand against alienation as *essentialist* categories. I would now like to argue that it is philosophically questionable to reduce one's understanding of words to their ring instead of looking at the way they are actually developed. Indeed, Marx's approach to these terms is deconstructing their German idealist heritage from within. To read a transhistorical human essence into *Alienated Labour* as its critical benchmark must be judged as a crass misreading of the text. As it should be clear by now, the *alien* in alienated labour does not at all stand for an alienation from 'human nature', 'lost origin' or 'anthropological essence', especially not as something static. Rather, the 'alien' Marx is most concerned about is the *alien power* (*Fremdherrschaft*) of capital as dead over living labour, and its resulting *heterocratic reign of hostility*. To analyse capitalist production as alienated in this way – to diagnose a structurally heteronomous organisation of society –, no Other of anthropocentric 'essence' is needed whatsoever. Yet, there is one concept that is usually read to be bare proof of Marx's essentialist, metaphysical, anthropocentric bias. This concept is the concept of species being, or *Gattungswesen*. Let us look into it in more detail to prove that it is, in fact, not essentialist either – especially not if 'essentialism' is supposed to mean 'transhistorical' or 'static' (as in Althusser, Jaeggi and others).

For Marx, what humans' 'species-being' denotes is precisely *not* any pre-given metaphysical or biologist nature of 'the' Human. On the contrary, Marx's human 'species-being' denotes the *openness of what humans can be* – set inside the historically grown society they constitute, and by which they are constituted at the same time. 'Species-being', in this sense, carves out nothing but the *practice of societal self-construction* within humans' relations among themselves and to nature. If 'species being' is defined by Marx, then not as a fixed essence but *as undefinable per definitionem* – or as *historically contingent*. The 'free universality'¹¹⁵ Marx speaks about, and which he links with *historicity*, is about this *impossibility to define* once and for all any 'transhistorical' depth of what humans are or must be. As 'historically universal' beings, humans' 'species-being' *consists* in being unfixable into pre-set eternities. The main 'essence' this species-being entails is its "conscious life-activity", or that its "own life is an object"¹¹⁶ for itself. This is, what humans are and what they can be is not yet known, and will never be known forever, but will always only be an approximation to the potentials and specificities of particular times and places. To say that human essence is historical and dependent on the material world, however, is to say that humans' 'essence' is non-essentialist, if essentialism is the undialectical understanding of a fixed and narrow essence.

Perhaps, Jean-Paul Sartre's *non-essentialist* – existentialist – humanism can be of some help to further correct the 'metaphysical' misunderstandings of Marx's 'species being'. For Sartre, humans' 'essence' *is nothing but having no essence*, since humans *are existence*.¹¹⁷ Instead of obeying certain rules that are already prescribed in human nature, whether ontologically, naturalistically, or theologically, what humans can be is dependent on what they decide to be, or on their own conscious and sub-conscious

115 Cf. Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte*. [Mit] Kommentar von Michael Quante (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 89: "*universellen, darum freien Wesen*".

116 Marx 1988, op. cit., 76.

117 Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Édition Nagel, 1954).

re-constructions. The resulting 'species being', then, comprises the 'human' not as essence but – if anything – as lack, void, *too-much or not-yet*. 'Species-being' is an *under-defined as over-determined* category: it is grasping an *openness*. This openness is directed towards one's (partially) conscious *becoming as one's very being*. What defines humans, thus, is that they are undefinable: their 'essence' is to be existential. In Marx's dialectical phrasing: the particularity of the human is that it is 'universal' – human nature is social, and human essence is historical.

Yet, in contrast to Sartre's denaturalised individualisation of the concept close to subjective idealism, in Marx's intersubjective materialism, it is not isolated individuals but the whole of the species which – in its historically changing metabolism with nature – transforms its being and the world accordingly. The reproduction of society is (even under free market conditions) a *planned activity organising the metabolism with nature*. 'Nature', however, is – as their 'inorganic body' – not outside of humans, since they are within it. For Marx, it is precisely the human being as "part of nature"¹¹⁸ that is a "*universal* and therefore a free being"¹¹⁹ – a being *both of history and nature*, mediating between the two. Marx's definition of 'species-being', therefore, is *de-defining it as an opening*¹²⁰: its 'nature' is societal; its presence is historical; its 'being' is between becoming and having-become. Since humans' 'species being' is an "ensemble of societal relations"¹²¹, what alienation alienates humans from is their *capacity to decide together on what they want to be* and become in the long run, this is: *in which society they would like to live*.

With his concept of 'species being', Marx defines humans as historically universal, or as *undefinable within transhistorical frameworks*. Under alienated-alienating conditions, it is not "god, not nature, but only

118 Marx 1988, op. cit., 76.

119 Ibid., 75.

120 Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *L'aperto: l'uomo a l'animale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002).

121 Karl Marx (et al.), *Marx Engels Werke. Band 3* (Berlin: Dietz, 1990), 6: "das ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse."

[the hu]man [it]self" that "can be this alien power over [the hu]man"¹²². Hence, it can also only be humans who are able to emancipate themselves from this historic situation, namely by getting the sci-tech-economic complex back under their own democratic control. In that manner, humans would be starting history, that is, make history instead of merely being made by it: making history less with despotic will ('domination of nature') than with responsible consciousness (deciding on *how to* realise the metabolism with nature necessary for every self-(re-)production).¹²³ The strategy beyond capitalist alienation, then, is *not* to make disposable more and more of nature, expanding one's realm of the controlled without constraint, but to reclaim society's *own* becomings, and to get into grip those dynamics and mechanisms that have been conjured up by society at large.

What people are supposed to reclaim, here, is not any 'lost truth' of 'homo sapiens', nor anything other that was or is 'given'. To be reclaimed, instead, is what is 'given' to and by people to and by themselves, namely, *their own socio-economic products and (re-)productions*.

In this view, Marx is focusing so much on alienated *labour* as on the production-side of capitalism not due to productivism or a forgetfulness of consumption and distribution, but rather to emphasise that it is not only politics or culture but the sci-tech-economic complex which is a *product and (re-)produced* by human beings. Marx's stress on (re-)production is the stress on how humans realise, maintain and transform what is and what becomes, which includes a stress on the possibilities of other ways of doing so. In that sense, Marx is neither using anthropological constants nor productivist imaginaries against alienation but the idea of a reclamation of products and the (re-)production process on the side of the producers. That "production is [human's] active species life"¹²⁴,

122 Marx 1988, op. cit., 79.

123 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Science and Technology as 'Ideology'", in Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 81-122, here 118.

124 Marx 1988, op. cit., 77.

then, does not entail a metaphysics of labour but simply underlines that the 'species-being' of humans is not an already given state of things but something to be produced and reproduced by human society and its members themselves. All in all, the external authority of a supposedly alien power – the authority of capital – has as its antipode not the interior of human essence but the intersubjective self-determination or political autonomy of self-democratising societies.

To summarise, there is no essentialism in Marx's *Alienated Labour*. Even the most contested term, 'species being', denotes no classical anthropological essence but an 'existence' explicitly open and historical, underdefined and over-determined, produced and reproduced, in which 'nature' is neither external nor abstracted, since humans themselves are natural, never outside but always part of it. Moreover, Marx's focus on labour is a focus not only beyond the ideologies that hide exploitation in the spheres of distribution or law, but a focus which highlights the producedness and (re-)production of the state of alienation, and thus the potentials of their overcoming.

**(c) Alienated labour, alienated consumption –
alienation from nature, alienation from life**

The alienation of labour is only the foundation of more sophisticated alienations as expressed, for example, in "trade, competition, capital, money"¹²⁵. Marx's alienation denotes not only the state when "the productive forces of societal labour are not controlled" but, more generally, a "non-mastered socialisation"¹²⁶ which includes the political, the cultural, the social, the scientific and the technological. As such, the term alienation is grasping a totality, which means: a process of totalisation. Under capitalism, the economy is increasingly *de-differentiating* as an intrinsically expansive, colonising, disembedding sphere. In this way, the 'alienation of labour' spreads also into formerly – or officially – out-

125 Ibid., 82.

126 Schliwa, op. cit., 63: "die Produktivkräfte der gesellschaftlichen Arbeit nicht beherrscht werden"; "nichtbeherrschte[] Vergesellschaftung".

er-economic spheres, which may exemplarily be seen when labour is invested in care, emotions, or relationships. With the culturalisation of the economy and the economisation of culture, with dislimited labour conditions and their erosion of the classical dualisms between workplace and home, with the collapse of leisure in labour time and with the totalisation of consumerism and the commodity form, alienation *invades most forms of daily life – also beyond the classical confines of work*. As a result, objective alienation not only refers to the ‘economic realm’ but to the sci-tech-economic complex more generally, as much as to the areas of culture, politics, and art.¹²⁷ The category of alienation transcends the classic realm of the economy precisely because, under the reign of capital, the economy disembeds from the confines of being a differentiated sphere.

Now, no matter what position one is in within this division of alienated labour, oneself gets the more subsumed under the heterocracy of capital the more autonomous the economic sphere becomes. Objective alienation is a form of real inversion in which the economic sphere is not in the hands of humans, so that production, consumption, and distribution put humans to work, instead of the other way around. Hence, alienation can be described as a “relation of powerlessness among individuals vis-a-vis the societal process as a whole”¹²⁸. Tellingly, the way the resulting individual powerlessness expresses itself is by the hyper-active delirium both of new forms of labour and of consumerism. Whether in the self-exploitative entrepreneurial subject(-ion) or in the commodity-addicted consumerist, doing, acting and being-active all remain under the spell of capital – therein, *even leisure becomes a form of alienated labour*. Under the law of capital value, every increase in autonomy in the workplace is synonymous to an increase in self-exploitation – or to a decrease in political autonomy vis-a-vis capital. Labour is thus not less but even more alien-

127 In this sense, ‘realpolitik’ may be seen as an alienation from politics; scientism as an alienation from science; technocracy as an alienation from technology; and culturalism as an alienation from culture.

128 Wolfgang Heise, “Über die Entfremdung und ihre Überwindung”, in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 13: 6 (1965), 684-710, here 702: “Ohnmachtsverhältnis der Individuen gegenüber dem gesellschaftlichen Gesamtprozeß”.

ated under post-Fordist, Toyotist, or lean conditions. Inside 'neo-capitalism', it is not that the worker finally sets herself free from the stupefying actions of repetitive toil. Rather, now, the worker's *whole personality* gets alienated, including her spirit, will, motivational apparatus, drives, social hopes and corporeal needs. The wages, in turn, are paid not only for the reproduction of the bodily function of workers but for their function as consumerists as well – thus getting reinvested into a consumption that works more along the lines of the needs of the productive forces than of the needs of the producers. This extension of alienated labour into formerly non-economic realms may thus be called "alienated consumption"¹²⁹. In alienated consumption, productivism and consumerism build up a closed dialectics of capital accumulation in which humans are not only designable products but also cheap raw materials and lucrative investment portfolios.

The dialectics of productivism and consumerism, however, destroys 'nature', or the environment of life, without which living beings cannot survive at all. Productivist alienated labour and consumerist alienated consumption lead together into an alienation of producers and consumers from nature as the very foundation of their existence. This alienation is an alienation both from inner and from outer nature, or from *the body* and from *planet earth*, as well as from their interconnectedness. Of course, the most extreme form of alienation from nature (both as body and as earth) can be observed with the lack in any sufficient structural transformations of the sci-tech-economic complex despite the decade-old knowledge of imminent human-induced climate change and its obvious threats. Alienation from 'nature', in this sense, is not an alienation from any romanticised abstract ideal of metaphysical origin. Rather, it is the *alienation from the conditions of possibility of one's very concrete everyday survival down-to-earth*.

129 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century", in David Bell (et al.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2001), 291-324, here 308.

With Kohei Saito, it may be said that this form of alienation could have only happened once the worker was separated from her self-subsistence through primitive accumulation – a self-subsistence that was still largely intact under feudal conditions. Within feudalism, *political* power structures were mediated through persons and their property in soil, leaving at least the “physical security” and “freedom and independence in the production process”¹³⁰ to the people. By contrast, the *economic* power structures of capitalism are mediated through the depersonalised logic of the law of value and its *property in time and labour*, so that people have no other choice but to *sell themselves* – their life (time) and work – on the market in-order *to survive*. Hence, the lack of subsistence and the precarity of survival under capitalism are synonymous to the dependency on the whims of a market which is abstracted from nature (both as body and as earth), and thus threatening its very survival. De-alienation, then, would also be one in regards to inner and outer nature, from bodies (needs) to planet earth (environment).

The alienation from the ‘bio-logistics’ of ecology, however, alludes to the alienation from ‘life’ even more broadly conceived. ‘Life’, here, does not stand for any mystical vitalism but for the *very real, scarce and fragile lifetime we got to live on earth*. This is the point Martin Hägglund raises¹³¹: alienated labour and consumption are about an alienation from life inasmuch as we are forced to waste most of our lifetimes with unnecessary labour (even during leisure) – despite living in an over-productive society. The short, precious, rare time of our very own lives gets commodified, sold, and thus externally determined by the alien force of capital, which coerces us into labour. Within the heterocracy of capital, life and living are no longer sufficient to themselves since they need to be ‘earned’ by ‘earning a living’. This brings together the objective phe-

130 Kohei Saito, *Natur gegen Kapital. Marx’ Ökologie in seiner unvollendeten Kritik des Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt/ Main: Campus Verlag, 2016), 40: “physische Sicherheit”; “Freiheit und Selbstständigkeit im Produktionsprozess”.

131 Cf. his beautiful study Martin Hägglund, *This Life. Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2020).

nomenon of alienated labour with the subject-related phenomenon of a lack in lifetime: being stolen by labour. Under capitalism, most of the time one got is the time one needs to spend to survive, or to work. The result is a paradoxical situation in which *survival negates living*. This is the most basic sense of the inversion that alienation denotes: we live to work, instead of working to live. Or, in Marx's words: spellbound by alienated labour, "life itself appears only as a *means to life*, to live, to survive"¹³² – if not as something to be consumed (*als Lebensmittel*). Here, lifetime "which, in concrete life, is a qualitative experience" is transformed "into a quantified, abstract force that dominates the worker's life."¹³³ Time – from its measurement to its acceleration – becomes a form of domination. Alienated labour, then, may be read as synonymous to an alienation from life for the sake of survival of capitalism. Yet, even more, the capitalist alienation from life is one also from survival of the many bodies of life including humans, and of the environment as a horizon of life, living and survival.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, I developed an objective account of alienation without which the *appearance* of this objectivity *within the subjects feeling alienated* cannot be explained either. That is because feeling alienated is not due to a subjective failure, say, in being able to feel at home in given institutions and roles but, rather, due to an objective failure of the given structures to enable their subjects to feel at home within them. Consequentially, only with a Marxian foundation of objective alienation can the phenomena of subjective alienation be explained as well. As such, however, the problem of alienation is never just a lack in individuals' appropriation of their microcosms but always a lack in society-wide reappropriations of the sci-tech-economic macrocosm. In other words: subjective alienation cannot be overcome if objective alienation is still firmly established. As

132 Marx 2009, op. cit., 90: "Das Leben selbst erscheint nur als *Lebensmittel*."

133 Ryan Gunderson, "Things Are the Way They Are: A Typology of Reification", in *Sociological Perspectives*, 64:1 (2021), 127-150, here 137.

important as the clarification of the many instances of subjective alienation are, therefore, they remain both theoretically one-dimensional and practically powerless if they are not coupled with an understanding of objective alienation.¹³⁴

After having sketched the roots of the concept of alienation in Rousseau, Feuerbach, and Marx (1), this essay compiled a list of official denials of the reality of alienation (2). Interestingly, most of them depend, in one way or another, on the denial of its objectivity, and its reduction to a merely subjective phenomenon. As a next step, I demonstrated why and how Rahel Jaeggi's 'reactualisation' of alienation is mainly just another version of this subjectivist reduction (3). By effectively abolishing the more radical accounts of all three, Rousseau ('authenticity'), Feuerbach ('anthropology') and Marx ('socialism'), Jaeggi's conceptual transformation ends up in a privatising domestication of the concept. As an alternative, I continued with presenting Rainer Forst's approach to alienation (*Entfremdung*) interpreted, here, as heterocracy (*Fremdherrschaft*) (4). Indeed, Forst's take is part and parcel of a "critical theory concerned about the reclamation of political autonomy", that is, as a "form of collective action."¹³⁵ Despite its advantages, however, it became clear that Forst's

134 In this essay, the 'subjective' (normative or moral) reasons as to why objective (structural) alienation is not justified, or why it should be resisted, are not discussed. The implicit premise behind this choice is the belief that subjects need no normative clarification by theorists to practice resistance, since it is their very bodies and sociality that 'convince' them to resist what destroys their soma and sociality – not any better or worse arguments regarding what is unjust or unfair. That is, in regards to alienation, *if people can judge on why they feel as they feel by unveiling the structural background of their feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness, then there is no need to additionally explain to them why these structures are to be overcome 'also', or why they are not justified. Still, subjective resistance is the logical (social-somatic) outcome if and only if objective alienation is understood in 'theory' and can thus be transcended in practice as well. That is the dialectics of theory and practice that was called, by Marx, revolutionary praxis (to be taken up, later, by Lukács, Gramsci and the Yugoslavian Praxis School, among others).*

135 Forst 2015, op. cit., 24: "Eine kritische Theorie, der es um die Wiedergewinnung politischer Autonomie geht, sieht in der Überwindung dieser Entfremdung ihr Ziel, d.h. der Entfremdung von der gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit

account largely remains inside existing institutions of the liberal public due to his Kantian republicanism, which splits off the political from the social.

By contrast, Marx's original text on *Alienated Labour* is still the most convincing analysis – both of objective and of subjective alienation, and of the ways to transcend them in practice. The essay, therefore, demonstrated that the accusations of Marx's theory of alienation as 'essentialist' can largely be deconstructed as misreadings (5). That is because in Marx's historicised, materialist, economic concept of 'alienation', there is no place for transhistorical, static, unchanging essences and origins. Moreover, Marx's account is as up to date as ever since his use of 'labour' can be extended not only beyond productivist bias but also beyond an economic 'sphere' too narrowly conceived. 'Alienated labour', as a result, can denote capital's alien power *over most divergent forms of labour*, which include 'alienated consumption' as much as an alienation from 'nature' and from 'life', both concretely conceived. This Marxian approach is also the most straightforward way to overcome alienation in the long run. Its expansion of the political autonomy of inter-subjective self-determination onto the sci-tech-economic complex effectively equals a qualitative growth in substantial democratisation.¹³⁶ Until this democratisation has been carried out, both objective and subjective alienation will remain a bitter – interdependent – reality.

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und der politischen Eingriffsmöglichkeit als Form kollektiven Handelns."

136 See, on this, also Lukas Meisner, "Die Radikalisierung des politischen Projekts der Moderne: Marcuses emanzipatorische Vernunft für eine rationale Gesellschaft", in: *Kritiknetz – Zeitschrift für Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft* (2022), online, no page count.

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The lively voice of Critical Theory

Berlin Journal of Critical Theory (BJCT) is a peer-reviewed journal which is published in both electronic and print formats by Xenomoi Verlag in Berlin. The goal is to focus on the critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and to extend their theories to our age. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the concerns and theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are neglected in its second and third generations.

We believe that the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are still capable of explaining many social, cultural, and political problems of our time. However, in some cases, we need to revise those theories. For example, the culture industry in our time can also work with a different mechanism from that described by Adorno and Horkheimer. In our age, the majorities can access the media and even respond to the messages which they receive – this is something which was not possible in Adorno and Horkheimer's time. But this doesn't mean that the culture industry's domination is over. Thus, we may need to revise the theory of the culture industry to explain the new forms of cultural domination in our age.

Therefore, we are planning to link the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt school to the problems of our age. This means that we are looking for original and high-quality articles in the field of critical theory. To reach our goals, we gathered some of the leading scholars of critical theory in our editorial board to select the best articles for this journal.

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