

Une promesse de bonheur: Philosophy as the Antecedent of the Nether World of Communism

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Look around you: religious and ethnic wars, territorial conquest, systematic humiliation of women, uprooted and displaced populations, torture, mass executions, large-scale xenophobia, starvation, epidemics. Inequality not seen since the days of Babylon. Indifference to suffering reminiscent of the pharaohs of three thousand years ago.

Bourgeois individualism does not seem to be stirred by secret services' checking people's correspondence, emails, and telephone conversations in nearly all Western liberal states. Constitutional republics allow the obsolescence of the rule of law without the slightest murmur. Power is outsourced to big but still essentially private businesses. Serious resistance is scarce, almost nonexistent. Scholarly and theoretical analysis could be comfortably entrusted to rather unscientific prophets, while the best of our contemporaries were dreaming of a severe philosophy, served by experience: this was disregarded by the many, which seems to call for revenge.

“Therefore shall Moab howl for Moab, everyone shall howl: for the foundations of Kir-hareseth shall ye mourn; surely they are stricken... . And gladness is taken away, and joy out of the plentiful field; and in the vineyards there shall be no singing, neither shall there be shouting; the treaders shall tread out no wine in their presses; I have made their vintage

shouting to cease. Wherefore my bowels shall sound like an harp for Moab, and mine inward parts for Kir-haresh. And it shall come to pass, when it is seen that Moab is weary on the high place, that he shall come to his sanctuary to pray; but he shall not prevail.” (ISAIAH 16:7, 10–12)

That is the hope that is being offered: that others, too, will be cut down and made to beg for mercy, in vain.

One is tempted to say, as so many have done before, “This is the way of the world; it is thus, it was always thus, and it will be so now and evermore.”

Try to refute it.

Priests and sages will tell you that everything is your fault and evil is but the reward for your sins:

“O Lord, my strength and my fortress and my refuge in the day of affliction, the Gentiles shall come unto thee from the ends of the earth, and shall say, Surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity and things wherein there is no profit. Shall a man make gods unto himself, and they are no gods? Therefore, behold, I will this once cause them to know mine hand and my might; and they shall know that my name is The Lord.” (JEREMIAH 16:19–21)

So everything will be rectified and justified. Everything will burn. The coats of arms of most countries still sport birds of prey and hunting animals. The remaining kings still appear on state occasions in military uniform with ceremonial swords. The main perk of power is still the ability to kill with impunity, in war or at the gallows, and signs of this main privilege are still shamelessly emblazoned over all official surfaces. Police are still mostly armed, and nobody raises an eyebrow. National holidays are still celebrated with military parades and solemn displays of weaponry. Daggers, guns, whips, and hunting crops are still valid symbols of manliness. Expressions like “deadly precision” and “killer smile” indicate what are the intuitive criteria of excellence. *Weak* and *small* and *poor* are still metaphors of inferiority, even in the moral and artistic realms.

These metaphors are contradicted by the best-known rebellious tradition.

They said to him, “Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom [of heaven]?” Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one, and

01 Helmut Koester and Thomas O. Lambdin, trans., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Rev. Ed., ed. James M. Robinson (SAN FRANCISCO: HARPERSANFRANCISCO, 1988), 129. For an outline of Gnostic morality, see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (BOSTON: BEACON PRESS, 1991), 47.

02 “Jesus’ destiny in the world is inseparable from that of the Word of God. That is why Christ and the Word of God are, I reaffirm, simply one and the same thing... . By announcing to all the Kingdom of God, he is doing no more than observing in his own behaviour the principles he proclaims... . Refusing the Kingdom means refusing the knowledge that Jesus bears—refusing the knowledge of violence and all its works. In the eyes of those who reject it, this knowledge is ill-omened: it is the worst of all forms of violence. This is indeed how things must look from the perspective of the sacrificial community. Jesus appears as a destructive and subversive force, as a source of contamination that threatens the community. Indeed, to the extent that he is misunderstood he becomes just that. The way in which he preaches can only make

when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness, then you will enter [the kingdom of heaven].” (*GOSPEL OF THOMAS*, II, 2: 22)⁰¹

Jesus would obliterate hierarchy by obliterating difference. The renewal is co-extensive with the suspension of contrast, especially the contrast that would found the usual notion of full-fledged humanity, the distinction between maturity and infancy. The idealization of children in Christendom is tantamount to the rejection of force, independence, self-reliance, and the joined ideals of masculinity, war, and property. Furthermore, this is a refusal of the idea of justice, replaced by mercy.⁰² Justice will have to be imposed, imparted, and upheld; thus, it is in need of might or, at least, in need of differentiation, the ability to tell things (and persons) apart. For this, one needs force. Force is always coercion; that is, making people do things they would not otherwise do. Those in possession of this ability—to tell people apart and to make inferior people do what they do not wish to do—are superior and just. Justice needs the abstract criteria that enables it to be applied to all, but the force of this application comes from outside. The force is based on division (this is precisely the word of Jesus when he describes his social and political mission in “the world,” but this is only the mundane description of that

mission as confronted by “the world”). Division, distinction, differentiation: these are needed to establish merit or the lack of it, and they are all aspects of force, of might—hence no true difference separates difference and hierarchy. The establishment of difference (e.g., between just and unjust) presupposes hierarchy, and this is what is refused (in an unavoidably self-contradictory manner) by Jesus’s preaching.

He divides and confounds his enemies by enunciating nondifferences, such as the nondifference between male and female, reducing it to a conceivably presexual, pregender state of affairs—that of childhood. He further divides and confounds his enemies by the violence of his nonviolence.

Mercy is offered irrespective of merit. Mercy is blind to justice. Mercy is, in sum, the only procedure whereby equality is effected. Mercy is the only idea that might be able to resist the lure of justice—the lure of righteous force, the lure of justified hierarchy, the lure of anointed coercion (church, state, army, property), the lure of ennobled might (of the powerful who are generous, responsible, provident, worldly wise, and brave)—and so capable of allowing human beings to desire and to renounce without guilt. *No guilt* is—or was—a synonym for the divine. But one that is immediately contradicted:

“For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that I do not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me: but how to perform that which is good, I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.” (ROMANS 7:14–19)

To the idea of mercy the tragic view of human nature is opposed: the

him appear to be totally lacking in respect for the holiest of institutions, guilty of hubris and blasphemy, since he dares to rival God himself in the perfection of Love that he never ceases to make manifest.” René Girard, with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metter (STANFORD CA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1987), 206–7. Jesus’s way of affirming ideas is, simply, “because I say so” or “because this is what I am.” Hence it is an absolute rejection of authority, and so again it is a rejection of force, the pride taken in absolute weakness and humility: in the powerlessness of a child.

servum arbitrium, the unfree will whose “maxim” (in the Kantian sense) is the not-willed evil. Human deeds ought to be forgiven because they are intrinsically evil. But see how evil is equated with disobedience in the secular version:

“All that is required, both in faith and manners, for man’s salvation is (I confess) set down in Scripture as plainly as can be. *Children obey your parents in all things: Servants obey your masters: Let all men be subject to the higher powers, whether it be the King or those that are sent by him: love God with all your soul, and your neighbour as yourself:* are words of the Scripture, which are well enough understood; but neither children, nor the greatest part of men, do understand why it is their duty to do so. They see not that the safety of the commonwealth, and consequently their own, depends upon their doing it. Every man by nature (without discipline) does in all his actions look upon, as far as he can see, the benefit that shall redound to himself from his obedience. He reads that covetousness is the root of all evil; but he thinks, and sometimes finds, it is the root of his estate. And so in other cases, the Scripture says one thing and they think another, weighing the commodities or incommunities of this present life only, which are in their sight, never putting into the scales the good and evil of the life to come, which they see not.”⁰³

At this moment, the message of Jesus appears as something external to carnal-temporal life, as a corrective to the mundane truth of “the world,” and this is how it has been mostly understood, clearly in error, and moreover undistinguished from the Old Covenant—which is also quite customary. People look only at their own interests, although they should not. But this is a misunderstanding. For “[t]here is none righteous, no, not one” (ROMANS 3:10). And the celebrated and decisive passage: “For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law” (ROMANS 5:13). As is well

known, the New Testament goes so far as to imply that law may be the cause of sin. But love and mercy are above sin and righteousness, and this refutes mortality and refutes justice. But this could not be sustained. No

03 Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 1990), 54.

this-worldly order can survive such a doctrine as its own. Some kind of two-realms theory was urgently needed.⁰⁴ But we are not concerned with this now. What needs to be established is that a solution opposing or ignoring hierarchy, difference, might, and justice was possible which presented itself as the true essence—and not just a scolding or a dressing-down of what appears to “exist.”

According to some, this was often implicit in religion. **Georges Bataille** believed that “expenditure” (*dépense*)—that is, the irrational surplus in any human intercourse—is a general characteristic of all economies. (“The meaning of Christianity is given in the development of the delirious consequences of the expenditure of classes, in a mental agonistic orgy practiced at the expense of the real struggle.”)⁰⁵

The idea of *potlatch*, taken from **Marcel Mauss**, means here that, in contradistinction to **Thomas Hobbes**, reciprocity—that is, duty—is made irrelevant by the superior claims of desire that wants to give freely (this is the originary Christian idea), without recompense or reward.⁰⁶ This, too, is a refutation of justice. The lack of balance and of symmetry will create a situation in which any attempt at a social order is absurd.

Upholding this impossibility is the function—admittedly, the hidden function—of modern philosophy in its central concept of *reason*.

This is hidden not only because of censorship and self-censorship, so that we should constantly read between the lines, heeding **Leo Strauss’s** warning, but also because of the sociological nature of the re-

04 On the incarnation of Logos in this context, see the marvelous remarks of Hans Blumenberg, *Matthäuspassion* (FRANKFURT: SUHRKAMP, 1988), 127. See also, Hans Blumenberg, *Die Sorge geht über den Fluß* (FRANKFURT: SUHRKAMP, 1988), 157–58.

05 Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (MINNEAPOLIS: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 1993), 127. See also, Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vols. 2–3, trans. Robert Hurley (NEW YORK: ZONE BOOKS, 1993), 89–94; and Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (NEW YORK: ZONE BOOKS, 1989), 43. For Bataille on death as an imposture, see Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Ann Boldt (ALBANY: STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, 1988), 69–76. Compare all of these passages to an extraordinary note by Bataille, dated February 7, 1937, “Ce que j’ai à dire ...,” in Georges Bataille, *L’apprenti sorcier*, ed. Marina Galletti (PARIS: ÉDITIONS DE LA DIFFÉRENCE, 1999), 324–36. For background, see Anne Roche and Jérôme Peignot, eds., *Laure: Une*

rupture: 1934 (PARIS: ÉDITIONS DES CENDRES, 1999) (with texts by Laure, Boris Souvarine, Georges Bataille, Pierre Pascal and Jenny Pascal, Simone Weil, and Michel Leiris); and Philippe Blanc, ed., *Troisième convoi* (TOURS: ÉDITIONS FARRAGO, 1998). See also the fascinating and important anthology edited by Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de Sociologie, 1937–1939* (PARIS: FOLIO/GALLIMARD, 1995).

06 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 1993).

07 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 1993).

08 “Der reine Begriff ist das absolut Unendliche, Unbedingte und Freie. ... Das Wesen ist aus dem Sein und der Begriff aus dem Wesen, somit auch aus dem Sein geworden.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke in 20 Bänden mit Registerband: 6: Die Wissenschaft der Logik II*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (FRANKFURT: SUHRKAMP, 1986), 274. This is preceded by Kant’s famous words on transcendental deduction (A) according to which every

ception of philosophical texts.⁰⁷ Philosophy in the modern age had become a sui generis political institution, both in bourgeois liberal and in Soviet-style societies, as an academic “specialism” and as a purveyor of ideology, a field in which science and politics are interpreted and in which power clashes are symbolically decided or smoothed out. This rôle of philosophy has been and is still contested by radicals *extra muros* (i.e., those of the **Karl Marx**, **Friedrich Nietzsche**, or **Guy Debord** type), this contestation being later always incorporated as the discipline’s (and the institution’s) self-criticism. However this may be, and however much philosophy had become one of the “ideological state apparatuses,” an irreducible remainder remained which is concealed in the procedure of abstraction itself. Consider how **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** would establish, crucially, the idea of a *concept* (which defines the main characteristics of *reason*): The pure concept, he says, is THE ABSOLUTELY INFINITE, UNCONDITIONAL AND FREE. (The essence is created from being and the concept from the essence. This creation or becoming has the significance of a counterpunch [*Gegenstoß*], so that which has become is rather what has been realized [*das Gewordene*], which is, again, the unconditional and the originary. The concept is the becoming-other or the definite; hence it is the infinite definite referring to itself. So, the concept is first of all the absolute identity with itself, the negation of negation, the infinite unity of negativity with itself.)⁰⁸ One can elucidate this only if one has in mind that which **Hegel** implicitly opposes. First, he opposes

the conventional or commonsensical idea of a concept (a precisely defined word whose fixed meaning will have to be adhered to throughout the investigation). Second—and this is what matters—the centerpiece of the supreme theory (philosophy) is dialectically unveiled as wholly negative, as an explosive-ly condensed concentration of freedom. How, then, can distinction, differentiation, and hierarchy rationally be formulated through a concept that explicitly rejects them? How can the most potent intellectual instrument of distinction between human beings—law—operate in this manner?

Hobbes foresaw this clearly: “Men are freed of their Covenants two wayes; by Performing; or by being Forgiven. For Performance, is the naturall end of obligation; and Forgivenesse, the restitution of liberty; as being a re-transferring of that Right, in which the obligation consisted.”⁰⁹ Forgiveness is the Christian idea of freedom, which supersedes obligation—nay, it might even obliterate it.

Both the conceptual and the moral formulation of an opening to nondifference (or identity in the Hegelian sense) contributes to the subversion of any variant of hierarchy rooted in either nature or law. Call it charity or mercy or call it “the concept” (the center of reason)—it will end up in canceling duty and sin, which alone can legitimize coercion aiming at distinction and differentiation. What Bataille—in one of the few positive and deliberate theories of communism—calls the renunciation of sovereignty and of dignity (together with the prohibition of racial inequality and of the exploitation of man by man) and the imposition of equivalence

kind of knowledge needs the concept, however incomplete or obscure, which is something general that can serve as a rule. But it can become a rule for phenomena only if it presents the reproduction of their multiplicity and withal the synthetic unity in their becoming-conscious.

“Alles Erkenntnis erfordert einen Begriff, dieser mag nun so unvollkommen, oder so dunkel sein, wie er wolle: dieser aber ist seiner Form nach jederzeit etwas Allgemeines, und was zur Regel dient. ... Eine Regel der Anschauungen kann er aber nur dadurch sein: daß er bei gegebenen Erscheinungen die notwendige Reproduktion des Mannigfaltigen derselben, mithin die synthetische Einheit in ihrem Bewußtsein, vorstellt.” Immanuel Kant, *Werke: 3: Kritik der reinen Vernunft, pt. 1*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (DARMSTADT: WISSENSCHAFTLICHE BUCHGESELLSCHAFT, SONDERAUSGABE 1983), 167.

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Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Robert Tuck (CAMBRIDGE, UK: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1992), 97.

10 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 327–71. See also G. M. Tamás, “Communism on the Ruins of Socialism,” in *Art Always Has Its Consequences*, ed. WHW (ZAGREB: WHW, 2010), 74–82; published in French as G. M. Tamás, “Le communisme sur les ruines du socialisme,” in *L'idée du communisme*: Vol. 2, Berlin 2010, ed. Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek (PARIS: LIGNES, 2011), 264–94.

11 To again state this in a religious manner, however provocative in the present context: “The Satan who is defeated by the Cross is the prince of this world, Satan as a principle of order. We must remember that Satan is also the prince of disorder and this other Satan is still intact, and can even be said to be ‘unleashed,’ not by God, but by the greater and greater loss of scapegoat effectiveness that characterises our world more and more with the passing of time. This world may well come to resemble the man in the Gospels from whom one demon was cast out but who failed to fill his life with divine things and the original demon came back with seven brothers, all more sinister than himself.” René Girard, “Satan,” in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (NEW YORK: CROSSROAD HERDER, 1996), 209.

would, incredibly, mean that conceptuality is tantamount socially to a classless society—which implies a wholesale destruction of boundaries between human categories that were always deemed to have been natural.¹⁰

Bourgeois thought thrives on distinction and has shown recently a propensity for fragmentation and impermanence. This might appear as an end to the mimetic affirmation of class society and its aggressive notions of domination. But, no, this is a generalization of the same idea, transforming it to a molecular omnipresence of domination everywhere, a dissemination of power rather than its revolutionary annihilation.

And here a new task appears: radical—or communist—critique should not be limited to a critique of modernity. The critique of the reified, abstract, and conceptual version of exploitation and oppression (described by the best radical minds from **Georg Lukács** to **Moishe Postone** to *Werthkritik*) is not sufficient, as the age-old forms of oppression (based on race, gender, religion, age, health, education, beauty, success, political influence, etc.) not only survive but are rejuvenated by modern capitalism.¹¹

Philosophy is not (and cannot be) solely an opponent of capitalism; it ought to be (and is) an enemy of any and all societies based on distinction and justice—that is, on hierarchy and law. The history of philosophy, of Christianity, and of communism begins with martyrdom, with the state murder of innocent but insurgent talkers. This is, as **Joseph Stalin** would say, no accident. This opposition between philosophy and

communism on the one hand, and society and the state on the other, is irremediable and something that cannot be mediated by historical development. The rejection, implicit in the concept, of family and property (and the combination of the two: inheritance, the foundation of historical continuity, and the intuitive grounding image of just desserts and hence of a just order) cannot be reconciled with any civilization known to humankind. Humanity, bereft of distinction (*acéphale*, says **Bataille**), of rank, gender, tribe, occupation, private interest, the pursuit of excellence, aspirations of individual liberty (i.e., raising oneself on the shoulders of another)—this is not the humankind familiar to the impartial and illusionless observer. This humanity is counterintuitive, it is unreal, it is unfamiliar—passing strange—like philosophy, which since times immemorial has been described as incomprehensible and practically useless. Genderless, unranked, renouncing violence (is a political term more despised and derided than *peace*?¹²): the idea of reason and the idea of communism must be (and are) greeted with hostility and contempt, so richly deserved.

“You cannot oppose everything,” we are told. Can we not?



Saying that philosophy is impractical contradicts **Marx**’s eleventh thesis on **Ludwig Feuerbach**. Since then, philosophy is supposed to have changed; it is supposed, inter alia, to be “a philosophy of praxis.”

12 The discredited idea of peace is present at the beginning of philosophy, in Empedocles’s *Katharmoi*; it is seen Ἀληθεῖν πάρα μύθοις in fragment 114. See Empédocle, *Les purifications: Un projet de paix universelle*, ed. and trans. Jean Bollack (PARIS: SEUIL, 2003), 59. The only contemporary author who takes the idea of peace seriously is Günther Anders. See his *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vols. 1–2 (MUNICH: C. H. BECK, 1994); and a number of other works by him, now unjustly forgotten.

13 See the extraordinary chapter on praxis, poiesis, and work in Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (STANFORD, CA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1999), 68–93. Agamben writes about his way of establishing philosophical meaning in his essay “Philosophical Archaeology,” in Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of Things: On Method*, trans. Luca d’Isante and Kevin Attali (NEW YORK: ZONE BOOKS, 2009), 81–111. (Compare Michel Foucault on rarity, exteriority, accumulation, totality, and plethora in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith [LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 2002], 133–41.) See also the relevant chapter, mostly on Martin Heidegger, “The Passion of Facticity,” in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected*

Essays in Philosophy, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (STANFORD, CA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1999), 185–204.

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To quote the famous but still frequently forgotten words: “The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces. The devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things. Labour not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a commodity and it does so in the same proportion in which it produces commodities in general. [We tend to forget, because of constant repetition, what a fantastic statement this is.] This fact simply [!] means that the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object, it is the objectification of labour. The realization of labour is its objectification.” Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Early Writings*, trans. Gregor Benton and Rodney Livingstone (LONDON: PENGUIN/NLR, 1992), 323–24.

The question is, then, what is praxis?¹³ For radicals like **Marx**—and many others— praxis is the opposite of The Thing, of reification. Genuine praxis, then, is opposed to a regular activity aimed at objects and at the transformation of objects for human use—this would be the bourgeois attitude—which use is nothing else but a thing-related, repetitive doing, done by people being transformed into thing-related agents whose personal aims in practicing this are again thing-related by the way of acquiring things, mediated by the General Thing (money). Praxis is nothing more than a hypothesis according to which a doing is possible which is wholly subjective, its direction determined, too, by wholly subjective (personal and temporal) aims or, even better, done for its own sake—that is, for the beauty, pleasure, joy contained in the doing—and its impermanence and mutability. The philhellene **Marx** sometimes equated this with play.

Play—in the spirit of classical German humanism, especially that of **Friedrich von Schiller**—is something not subordinated to necessity. Hence the liberating effect of praxis in **Marx**’s philosophy. **Giorgio Agamben** is quite wrong when he believes that “labor” is **Marx**’s kind of praxis. On the contrary, it is liberated labor; that is, nonlabor or even antilabor. “Work” is the negative counterpart of modernity in which the paradigm of autonomous, not reified human activity is art. **Marx** is perfectly clear on this from the beginning.¹⁴ Labor is the evil from which communism is expected to save humankind. Applied science, applied

art, applied philosophy—that is, applied in the service of commodity-producing, alienated labor, the end result of which is capital—is as much an anathema to **Marx** as it was or would have been **Goethe**, **Schiller**, **Hölderlin**, the **Schlegel** brothers, **Fichte**, and the young **Schelling**.

But **Nietzsche** says—in section 64 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, IV—that “knowledge for its own sake” is the last trick of morals; we shall be embroiled in it for one last time.¹⁵ “Morals” here is of the genealogical kind: a morals deduced. In **Marx**, morals do not appear at all—morals justifying reification and commodification would be an abomination—but communism as the opposite of reified labor is not deduced; it is presupposed as a critical instrument in the Kantian style. This—together with the entire German *Klassik*—would have looked to **Nietzsche** like a naïveté. For him, the impurities of the spirit are appealing because they free the living soul from the tyranny of emasculating morals.¹⁶ *Irrespect* is no stranger to **Marx**, and he was even less naïve than **Nietzsche** concerning usefulness.

The one thing needful might be the transformation of the critical instrument—communism—into a *Lebensform* (which is slightly more than a way of life). In the 225 years of the Movement, it has been tried—this was the (unrealized) idea of a communist party, of a transcending movement that is the modern successor of a *hairesis*, of a specific philosophical practice—frequently to preempt communism as a situation by a liberated praxis within an oppressive and repressive society. Actually,

15 “‘Die Erkenntnis um ihrer selbst willen’—das ist der letzte Falsstrick, den die Moral legt: damit verwickelt man sich noch einmal völlig in sie.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in *Nietzsche: Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 5, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (MUNICH: DTV/DE GRUYTER, 1993), 85.

16 Nietzsche says in his summation of the Goncourts’ journal, “man hat von Zeit zu Zeit das Bedürfnis d’un encanaillement de l’esprit” and “wir sind le siècle des chefs-d’oeuvre de l’irrespect.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente II: 1887–1889*, vol. 13 of *Nietzsche: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (MUNICH: DTV/DE GRUYTER, 1993), 117, 119.

17 Ernst Bloch knew a thing or two about utopia: “Someone who has it good finds it easy to be good. Hegel does the same thing, but at the wrong place; rather than being good, he finds everything good, in order not to have to be good himself.” Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (STANFORD, CA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2000), 179. (In the original German: “Wem es gut geht, der hat es leicht, gut zu sein. Auch

Hegel tut so, aber am falschen Platz, nicht gut seiend, sondern alles gut findend, um nicht selber gut sein zu müssen.” Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 2nd version, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 3 [FRANKFURT: SUHRKAMP, 1964], 226.)

“the idea of a communist party” is more utopian than the idea of communism itself.¹⁷ An experimental cell of the future amid the alienated and reified conditions of advanced capitalism? This is where the Comintern and the 1960s—hippies, New Left, *groupuscules*—agreed. All of these needed drugs, whether of the Red Army or the marijuana variety. All ended up in glorying in resistance only.

The communist practice **Marx** had in mind—the *useful knowledge*—was philosophy. When he is criticizing **Hegel**’s doctrine of the state, he has this to say: “The bureaucracy can be superseded [*aufgehoben*] only if the universal interest becomes a particular interest *in reality* and not merely in thought, *in abstraction*, as it does in **Hegel**. And this can take place only if the *particular* interest really becomes the *universal* interest.”¹⁸ What then does “*in reality*” mean? Perhaps that the subjective becomes the general case and that conceptual imagination can steer affective and material life without constraints deemed natural. The general case in bourgeois society—in class society—is neutrality vis-à-vis the particular, since the particular (egoism) is crime, insubordination, something inferior because it cannot be conceptualized, because it is *desire*. And desire is absence; it is *lack*. Hence it is nonautonomous, dependent, servile. But for **Marx**, this crime, the “concrete” “*in reality*,” is precisely that which is supreme. Here he is close to the **Schlegels**, to **Hamann**, to **Novalis**—to the Romantics. Labor—the life-work of the proletarian—

18 Marx, *Early Writings*, 109; emphasis in the original.

19 “The exchange value of labour, the realization of which takes place in the process of exchange with the capitalist, is therefore presupposed, predetermined, and only undergoes the formal modification which every only ideally posited price takes on

is, **Marx** says, only exchange value for the worker but use value for the capitalist.¹⁹

The “*in reality*” applies thus only to the capitalist. Hence, it is only a partial-particular reality, the reality of a “*Stand*,” of an “estate,” of a “calling” (as **Hegel** would have it). A content objectified through the agency of another.

But this is perverse; it is the work of critical analysis exercised by those who are only exchange value into themselves—the

philosophical and maybe artistic practice of those whose “calling” in bourgeois society condemns them to the inability of such a practice unless this position is conquered by subversion, preempting the ultimate revolution—by forming themselves into a transgressive subject (“the communist party”) that might become an *intermundium* of an intellectual imitation of an example that does not exist. We know that such attempts historically were instances of asceticism, heroism, fanaticism, cruelty, self-mutilation, terror, maniacal domination, and sheer madness. What has been conquered is not exploitation but banality.²⁰ But what of a transgressive practice that may avoid cruelty toward oneself and others and adopt a symbolic, preemptive routine that does not betray the transcending ambitions of a radical critique while it goes beyond bold gesturing and beyond holding empty metaphoric power in a permissive environment that allows it because it does not really threaten anything of true importance, as so often happens in the “art world” and similar milieus? The usual recipe in the history of the Movement has almost always been the therapeutic and at the same time self-improving road to the downtrodden under the time-honored banner of solidarity, the emancipatory practice of joining partial and local struggles, an exercise in self-abasement and humility—suffering evil gladly in the service of humanity but without trying to reform or ennoble the victims of oppression whose very alienation was a badge of the human condition to be changed, without attempting to dominate (morally and intellectually) the potential rebels with one’s allegedly superior wisdom. This was the admirable way of the nineteenth-

when it is realized. It is not determined by the use value of labour. It has a use value for the worker himself only in so far as it is exchange value, not in so far as it produces exchange values. It has exchange value for capital only in so far as it is use value. It is a use value, as distinct from exchange value, not for the worker himself, but only for capital. The worker therefore sells labour as a simple, predetermined exchange value, determined by a previous process—he sells labour itself as objectified labour.” Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (LONDON: PENGUIN/NLR, 1993), Notebook 3: 306–7.

20 Compare the strange and intriguing chapters on Charles Fourier and Marx in Walter Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk*. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. V-2, ed. Theodor W. Adorno, Gershom Scholem, Rolf Tiedemann, and Hermann Schweppenhauser (FRANKFURT: SUHRKAMP, 1998), 764–823.



MLADEN STILINOVIC

Rad je bolest—Karl Marx

[Work Is a Disease—Karl Marx], 1981

Acrylic on cardboard

century Russian “nihilist” revolutionaries: “going to the people.” But this meant abandoning the last semblance of critique: assuming a general—oppressed—human condition, acquiescing, and ultimately giving up all revolutionary hope. The parallels with Christianity—the postponement of transcendence into another world for the sake of love for the oppressed in this one—are obvious. See the cooperation of white Marxists with “colored” colonial nationalisms, ethnicisms, “communalisms,” tribalisms, and theocracies as exercises in rejecting sinful pride.

Philosophy as a discipline hostile, because of its conceptual and unavoidably universalist nature, to difference—and thus to inequality and hierarchy—is opposed per se to such spiritual adventures. Radical philosophy is no academic specialism: **Marx** and **Nietzsche**, **Benjamin** and **Debord** were excluded from the university, as were **Descartes** and **Spinoza**. Academic philosophy has always been an affair of ecclesiastic hierarchs and, later, their secularized successors, the professors. Philosophy may be a “calling,” but it is still not a profession; it is still extraneous to the serious business of science, of empirical and quantifiable social research, and of historical philology. Like art, it is “heterogeneous” in **Bataille’s** sense, superfluous to the smooth functioning of the

factory called “present.” Philosophy can be and is frequently falsified and defrauded. Still, it cannot be without open, possibly infinite, questioning, and so—although methodically uncertain and despite doubts as to its ability to deliver any kind of useful “results,” as well as its relevance to reasonable folk—it persists as a problematic self-reflective practice that requires absolute freedom for its continued existence. I cannot conceive of anything more eminently practical. The very absurdity of philosophy is a guarantee for the emergence of possible future liberating discourses, traditionally dubbed “communism,” in order to stress their decided “otherness” and ability (or even likelihood) to cause scandal and elicit hate. If philosophy did not exist, who could rationally combat the suffering and humiliation that is accepted by all those who are worldly wise? Who would try to refute the necessity of a human condition apparently reconciled with domination, injustice, and futility? For these seem to be part of any life imaginable. Who would dare otherwise to inject imagination in the dissection of human affairs? Not so long ago, women and children and people of color were held to be not much more than chattel. People believed that excellent physiological and moral reasons supported such a state of affairs. Those reasons have been successfully demolished by critical philosophy.

Communism is something toward which that demolition work is pointing without the demolition workers being able to tell us—or themselves—what that something really is. *f*



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