



Indivisible Remainder and the Death of Death

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Abstract

Hegel's idealism is generally perceived as a system of rational sublation (Aufhebung) of all empirical contingencies: nothing resists notional mediation which, in a movement of negation of negation, establishes a rational totality. Already Schelling opposed to this complete sublation an "indivisible remainder" of empirical contingency. However, a close reading of Hegel makes it clear that the concluding moment of a dialectical movement of sublation is an empirical remainder which totalizes it, like the body of Christ in Christianity. And the same goes for the process of "negation of negation": it concludes with a failure of negation, and its ultimate form is a failed suicide where the subject survives as a living dead. Such a reading of Hegel makes him a thinker of our time which is the time of a failed negation: most of us live as survivors of our death, with life dragging on in depressive apathy.

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The Standpoint of the Absolute

In his short text "The Return of Metaphysics: Hegel vs Kant," Robert Pippin provides a succinct description of his (Kantian, in my view) reading of Hegel:

"Hegel's basic claim had three components. The first is the claim that a priori knowledge of the world, the ordinary spatio-temporal world, is possible; knowledge about that world, but achieved independently of empirical experience. The second component is where all the interpretive controversies begin. It is the claim that this a priori knowledge, while in some sense ultimately about the world, consists in thinking's or reason's knowledge of itself; thinking's understanding of thinking or, as Hegel designates, a 'science of pure thinking.' /.../ Hegel's enterprise takes as its topic the categories or 'thought determinations' (Denkbestimmungen) necessary for thought to have determinate

objective content, an enterprise that at the same time specifies the determinations inherent in the possible determinacy of being itself. That means it is a metaphysics, one based on the 'identity' in this sense, of 'thinking and being.' This is not a knowledge of any nonsensible reality, it is a knowledge of any intelligible reality, the only kind there is. It is a revival of the great principle of classical philosophy: to be is to be intelligible. Thinking's knowledge of itself is knowing what could be intelligible and therewith a knowledge of what could be."

Sum ergo cogito is thus the formula of transcendental idealism: whatever there is has to appear within the structure of Denkbestimmungen deployed in logic, so that "I am" is already a statement within the space of thinking, i.e., only a thinking being can say "I am." But is this the ultimate limit of our thought? How to unite this with Hegel's claim that philosophy is its time conceive in concepts? Can, say,

quantum mechanics still be fully covered by Hegel's matrix of all possible thought-determinations?

But does Hegel really follow Kant's insight that, even if our thinking cannot reach reality in itself, it has one object fully accessible to it – thinking itself? Pippin's idea is that, based on this insight, Hegel simply extends it to all possible objects and thus elevates it into metaphysics: whatever we think is circumscribed by the form-determinations of our thinking. However, Hegel's "reversal" of Kant is much more refined and radical. Kant's position is that the intractable thing that resists our cognitive grasp is reality "in itself," while thinking can clearly analyze itself and bring out its own immanent structure – antinomies and inconsistencies only arise when thinking is applied to reality beyond the scope of our experience. Hegel's position is that inconsistencies and "contradictions" are immanent to thinking, so that they emerge already when thinking tries to think itself, its own immanent structure – our thinking "reaches" reality precisely because its immanent "contradictions" mirror contradictions in/of reality itself. The failure of thinking to grasp reality is immanent to reality itself.

The predominant liberal reading of Hegel with its focus on reconciliation seems to remain within the horizon of the old Hegelian English joke: "I tried to read Hegel but found out that I Kant." (We ignore here the potential obscenity of "Kant" which can be associated to "can't" as well as to "cunt.") They read Hegel, but their reading remains within the Kantian boundaries. Terry Pinkard correctly located the limit of the Kantian appropriations of Hegel into their uneasiness with the notion of the Absolute:

"to the extent that Hegel's legacy depends on his embrace of the necessity of 'the absolute,' Hegel's legacy in political theory at least remains troubled. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has consistently argued that although there are many independent items in Hegel's system worthy of further independent development on their own, his deeper commitment to some kind of 'absolute' nonetheless has various authoritarian and antidemocratic implications that are not mere prejudices of his own time but which follow from the reliance on the 'absolute.' /.../ the Hegelian emphasis on the absolute and on history as the self-articulation of the absolute has been argued to be Hegel's Achilles Heel, the real point at which the Hegelian system plunges into irretrievability for those after him."

This point seems obvious: does the talk about the "Absolute" in such a direct way as Hegel practices it, positing the Absolute not in some Beyond out of our reach but as the topic of fully rational analysis, not belong to another era, the

era which was dealt a mortal blow with the rise of modern empirical sciences and secular societies? In the "Preface" to his *Hegel: A Biography* (2000), Pinkard concisely deploys how all philosophical and political misunderstandings about Hegel originate in the wrong reading of his notion of the Absolute:

"Hegel is one of those thinkers just about all educated people think they know something about. His philosophy was the forerunner to Karl Marx's theory of history, but unlike Marx, who was a materialist, Hegel was an idealist in the sense that he thought that reality was ultimately spiritual, and that it developed according to the process of thesis/ antithesis/ synthesis. Hegel also glorified the Prussian state, claiming that it was God's work, was perfect, and was the culmination of all human history. All citizens of Prussia owed unconditional allegiance to that state, and it could do with them as it pleased. Hegel played a large role in the growth of German nationalism, authoritarianism, and militarism with his quasi-mystical celebrations of what he pretentiously called the Absolute.

Just about everything in the first paragraph is false except for the first sentence.

What is even more striking is that it is all clearly and demonstrably wrong, has been known to be wrong in scholarly circles for a long time now, and it still appears in almost all short histories of thought or brief encyclopedia entries about Hegel."

From the Hegelian standpoint, it is easy to see how this "clearly and demonstrably wrong" opinion imputes to Hegel a decidedly pre-Hegelian notion of the Absolute as something that is even more substantial than what we are facing as objective reality, a true In-itself that encompasses all and is beyond the scope of our representation. For Hegel, however, the minimal determination of "absolute" is self-relating: an entity which never simply and directly interacts with its environment (or is "influenced" by it) – it reflexively determines itself the mode of this interaction, the mode of how it is determined by its others. This, incidentally, is also the minimal determination of freedom: I am free if I minimally determine the conditions of my interaction with my environment. That's why life is the basic form of freedom: a living organism "constructs" its own environment, it selects parts of the environment (dangers, food, sexual partners) with which it interacts. That's why, in a living organism, the way I relate to an other is always also a way I relate to myself: I search for food because I need to survive, I search for a mate because I need to procreate... What this means is that, as a living organism, I am not just myself in my flat presence, I simultaneously appear to myself

in a certain mode (of hunger, of a drive to mate...) This is why the Absolute is not the true In-itself beyond objective reality - to arrive at the Absolute, what one has to add to the objective order is its appearance itself: one has to grasp how subjective appearances and illusions of a thing that blur and misrepresent its "objective reality" are a moment of this thing itself, its necessary moment. We arrive at the absolute standpoint when we grasp how, if we subtract from a thing its illusory appearance, if we try to grasp a thing as it "really is in itself," this thing itself disintegrates. That's why Marx can be said to conceive capital as an absolute: he realized that the illusory way we experience capital (like commodity fetishism) are constitutive of its reality, that capital can only reproduce itself through these illusions. In this sense, as Hegel repeats again and again, the Absolute is the unity of the objective and the subjective: it is not a subjective notion that fits the objective (how things really are), it is the objective order which includes its subjective misrepresentations. In this sense, freedom is a subjective experience, but it is the very freedom (autonomy) of subjective experience with regard to "objective" reality that is the stuff of science. The very fact that we cannot ground it in "objective" reality is a negative proof of freedom.

Is, however, such a notion of the unity of the objective and the subjective enough to overcome being caught into a transcendental horizon? Things are here more difficult and impregnated by ambiguities than it may appear. The contrast between scientific realism and transcendental culturalism can be formulated in Spinoza's terms: if, for scientists, the name of the All is *Deus sive natura*, for culturalists it is *Deus sive cultura*, i.e., the cultural horizon ("episteme") is the ultimate reference of our knowledge. In the move from Kant to Hegel, we admit that our knowledge, when it tries to understand reality, gets involved in insoluble antinomies and paradoxes, but we then transpose this epistemological obstacles into reality itself, as it happens exemplarily from quantum mechanics (X is simultaneously particle and wave) and Marxism.

But, again, is this ontologization of epistemological antinomies and obstacles enough? Is there not also a zero-level of gnostic insight called by mystics "night of the world," confrontation with the abyss/crack that we "are" as the point at which only we touch the Real in itself? This "night of the world" was called by Freud the unconscious "death drive," and, prior to Freud, Schelling developed the notion that the basic free decisions made by us are unconscious. So, with regard to Libet's experiment, from the Freudian standpoint, the basic underlying problem is that of the status of the Unconscious: are there only conscious thoughts (my belated conscious decision to move a finger) and "blind" neuronal processes (the neuronal activity to move the finger), or is there also an unconscious "mental" process? And, what is

the ontological status of this unconscious, if there indeed is one? Is it not that of a purely virtual symbolic order, of a pure logical presupposition (the decision had to be made, although it was never effectively made in real time)? At the apogee of the German Idealism, F.W.J. Schelling deployed the notion of the primordial decision-differentiation (*Ent-Scheidung*), the unconscious atemporal deed by means of which the subject chooses his/her eternal character which, afterwards, within his/her conscious-temporal life, s/he experiences as the inexorable necessity, as "the way s/he always was":

"The deed, once accomplished, sinks immediately into the unfathomable depth, thereby acquiring its lasting character. It is the same with the will which, once posited at the beginning and led into the outside, immediately has to sink into the unconscious. This is the only way the beginning, the beginning that does not cease to be one, the truly eternal beginning, is possible. For here also it holds that the beginning should not know itself. Once done, the deed is eternally done. The decision that is in any way the true beginning should not appear before consciousness, it should not be recalled to mind, since this, precisely, would amount to its recall. He who, apropos of a decision, reserves for himself the right to drag it again to light, will never accomplish the beginning."

This absolute beginning is never made in the present: its status is that of a pure presupposition, of something which always-already took place. In other words, it is the paradox of a passive decision, of passively assuming the Decision that grounds our being as the supreme act of freedom - the paradox of the highest free choice which consists in assuming that one is chosen. In his *Adieu* Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida tries to dissociate the decision from its usual metaphysical predicates (autonomy, consciousness, activity, sovereignty...) and think it as the "other's decision in me": "The passive decision, condition of the event, is always, structurally, another decision in me, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolutely other in me, of the other as the absolute who decides of me in me." In psychoanalytic terms, this choice is that of the "fundamental fantasy," of the basic frame/matrix which provides the coordinates of the subject's entire universe of meaning: although I am never outside it, although this fantasy is always-already here, and I am always-already thrown into it, I have to presuppose myself as the one who posited it.

Schelling here just radicalizes Kant's notion of a primordial, atemporal, transcendental act by means of which we choose our "eternal character," the elementary contours of our ethical identity. And the link with Freud's notion of an unconscious decision is clear here: this absolute beginning is never made in the present, i.e., its status is that of a pure

presupposition, of something which always-already took place. The topic of radical Evil, from Kant to Schelling, is an attempt to solve the enigma of how it is that we hold an evil person responsible for his deeds (although it is clear to us that the propensity to Evil is part of this person's "nature," i.e. that he cannot but "follow his nature" and accomplish his deeds with an absolute necessity), Kant and Schelling postulate a non-phenomenal transcendental, atemporal act of primordial choice, by means of which, each of us, prior to his temporal bodily existence, chooses his eternal character. Within our temporal phenomenal existence, this act of choice is experienced as an imposed necessity, which means that the subject, in his phenomenal self-awareness, is not conscious of the free choice which grounds his character (his ethical "nature") - that is to say, this act is radically unconscious.

Kant gets involved here into a difficult predicament: for him, we are not free when we just do what we want but only when we follow the moral law against our spontaneous tendencies (which enslave us to our pathological nature). However, in his detailed analysis of evil, Kant is compelled to distinguish between the »ordinary« evil (the violation of morality on behalf of some »pathological« motivation, like greed, lust, ambition, etc.), the »radical« evil, and the »diabolical« evil. It may seem that we are dealing with a simple linear graduation: »normal« evil, more »radical« evil, and, finally, the unthinkable »diabolical« evil. However, upon a closer look, it becomes clear that the three species are not at the same level, i.e., that Kant confuses different principles of classification. »Radical« evil does not designate a specific type of evil acts, but an a priori propensity of the human nature (to act egotistically, to give preference to pathological motivations over universal ethical duty) which opens up the very space for »normal« evil acts, i.e., which roots them in human nature. In contrast to it, »diabolical« evil does designate a specific type of evil acts: acts which are not motivated by any pathological motivation, but are done »just for the sake of it,« elevating evil itself into an a priori non-pathological motivation – something akin to Poe's »imp of perversity.«

While Kant claims that »diabolical evil« cannot actually occur (it is not possible for a human being to elevate evil itself into a universal ethical norm), he nonetheless asserts that one should posit it as an abstract possibility. Interestingly enough, the concrete case he mentions (in Part I of his *Metaphysics of Mores*) is that of the judicial regicide, the murder of a king executed as a punishment pronounced by a court: Kant's claim is that, in contrast to a simple rebellion in which the mob kills only the person of a king, the judicial process which condemns to death the king (this embodiment of the rule of law) destroys from within the very form of the (rule of) law, turning it into a terrifying travesty – which is why, as Kant put it, such an act is an »indelible crime« which cannot ever be pardoned. However, in a second step,

Kant desperately argues that in the two historical cases of such an act (the killing of Charles I under Cromwell and in the execution of the king in 1793 France), we were dealing just with a mob taking revenge... Why this oscillation and classificatory confusion in Kant? Because, if he were to assert the actual possibility of »diabolical evil,« he would find it impossible to distinguish it from the Good – since both acts would be non-pathologically motivated, the travesty of justice would become indistinguishable from justice itself.

The Death of God

And Hegel? Far from dispelling the classificatory confusion present in Kant, Hegel elevates it into a principle – in his philosophy of right, he demonstrates how a travesty of justice is sublated into justice itself. And the same holds for Hegel's »absolute knowing« which is his name for accepting the full autonomy of all forms of Otherness, inclusive of nature. Decades ago, in the early years of modern ecology, some perspicuous readers of Hegel noted that the Hegelian idealist speculation does not imply an absolute appropriation of nature – in contrast to its productive appropriation, speculation lets its Other be, it doesn't intervene into its Other. As Frank Ruda pointed out, Hegel's Absolute Knowing is not a total *Aufhebung* – a seamless integration of all reality into the Notion's self-mediation; it is much more an act of radical *Aufhebung* – of giving up, of renouncing the violent effort to grab reality. Absolute Knowing is a gesture of *Entlassen*, of releasing reality, of letting-it-be and stand on its own, and, in this sense, it breaks with the endless effort of labour to appropriate its Otherness, the stuff that forever resists its grasp. Labour (and technological domination in general) is an exemplary case of what Hegel calls "spurious infinity;" it is a pursuit which is never accomplished because it presupposes an Other to be mastered, while philosophical speculation is at ease, no longer troubled by its Other.

Schelling is thus wrong when he claims that Hegel's dialectical process is the process of full integration/sublation of all reality into the self-movement of the Idea, and that Hegel ignores the "indivisible remainder /nie aufhebbare Rest/" that resists this integration: for Hegel, such a remainder is the concluding moment/product of the dialectical process. To avoid repeating well-known examples (the monarch as a biologically determined head of power), suffice it to mention nature itself. When logic ends in a circular movement of describing its own genesis ("method"), it releases itself into nature which is not the other of logic but logic/idea itself in its otherness. For Schelling, the indivisible remainder is the remainder of substantial reality that cannot be integrated into Idea, while for Hegel, this remainder is the final product of Idea itself, the ultimate result of its self-relating negativity.

Etienne Balibar emphasizes the ambiguity of Hegel's

formulas of self-relating negativity: negation of negation, death of death, the disappearance of disappearance itself... They can be read as a return to positivity, a reconciliation (death of death as a return to life in Resurrection), or as an absolute annihilation, the erasure of erasure, the absence of absence itself where what was lost is no longer even experienced as something missing – in this second case, we can say, in Heidegger's style, that the ultimate meaning of death is the death of meaning itself. Hegel himself relies on this ambiguity when he says that "the meaning attached to death is that through death the human element is stripped away and the divine glory comes into view once more – death is a stripping away of the human, the negative. But at the same time death itself is this negative, the furthest extreme to which humanity as natural existence is exposed; God himself is /involved in/ this."(326)

How to read the last words? Through death, humanity in its natural existence (its decaying bodily reality, its finitude) is negated, so that the "divine glory" of the infinite and immortal Spirit can become visible without any finitude obfuscating the view. "But at the same time death itself is this negative": god is not a perfect full supreme Being that appears when finitude is stripped away, it is itself the absolute force of negativity, of "stripping away" all positive existence – in "God," the highest perfection coincides with the absolute power of destruction, so that, in the strongest sense possible, "God" is nothing but this negativity brought to the absolute, which means: to self-relation. And this means that God himself has to die; but since only mortal humans die, God has to appear as a human mortal – this is how "God himself is /involved in/ this": what dies on the Cross is not a messiah of God, his earthly representative, but the God of beyond himself. So what can then mean Resurrection? The Spirit that survives in Resurrection is Holy Spirit, the community /Gemeinde/ of believers. Hegel goes to the end here: this is why he says that Resurrection is not an "objective fact" that can be verified by everyone, believer or non-believer – Resurrection takes place only for believers, it is restricted to them. Balibar noticed this key aspect of the "death of death":

"This restriction, almost a warning, is clearly expressed through the repeated use of 'only' (nur) to inscribe the meaning of Tod des Todes in the realm of Faith only: God »maintains himself in this process, and the latter /the death of God/ is only the death of death. God rises again to life, and thus things are reversed. The resurrection is something that belongs just as essentially to faith. After his resurrection, Christ appeared only to his friends. This is not an external history for unbelievers; on the contrary, this appearance occurs only for faith."(323-4) The Resurrection is a subjective certitude about the presence of the 'spiritual kingdom'. However this subjective certainty does not lie in the individual:

it exists only as a common or collective self-consciousness"(637-8).

The domain of community (Gemeinde) is therefore the proper region of Spirit: "the community itself is the existing Spirit, the Spirit in its existence, God existing as community."(331) What "God is love" means is: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."(John 4:12, New International Version) The beauty of this reversal is that Hegel fully endorses what is for a common sense the standard argument against resurrected God: that it is not a "real miracle" but something that happens only in the mind of believers, their imagination. His answer is: those who make this argument are looking for the resurrected God at the wrong place, as an entity in positive external reality. The resurrected God is nothing but the Holy Spirit, a presupposition posited by the believers: in it, faith and the object of faith are one and the same, so faith is not something that should be proven by facts. So the "death of death" does not mean that, after Resurrection, we all live in God eternally – it is also the other way round, God only lives in us, in our faith. And if this holds for God, it holds also for its opposite, the Evil: evil is not nature as external to God, Evil is thoroughly spiritual, it is the necessary first appearance of Spirit, Spirit in its abstraction of substantial content, opposed to nature. Here, again, I disagree with Balibar who claims that the distance between nature and Evil is a symptom of something that runs against Hegel's basic thesis: "Hegel always keeps a writing distance between the words Natur and Böse. 'Nature' is God's alienation, and 'evil' is God's alienation, but ... caution!" (636) Balibar's implication is that, although for Hegel nature and the Evil should be the same (alienation from God as the supreme Good), he symptomatically resists directly identifying them. I think that it is Balibar who is here symptomatically wrong. For Hegel, nature is NOT evil, evil is a spirit which excludes the wealth of nature and of its substantial content, evil is thinking as such:

"It is cognition that first posits the antithesis in which evil is to be found. Animals, stones and plants are not evil, evil first occurs within the sphere of rupture or cleavage; it is the consciousness of being-myself in opposition to an external nature. /.../ It is through this separation that I exist for myself for the first time, and that is where the evil lies. /.../ So it is not the case that /rational/ consideration has an external relationship to evil: it is itself what is evil."

Brought to the end, this means that the supreme Evil is God himself insofar as he is considered as a substantial entity opposed to the finite reality, separated from it. We should shamelessly repeat here Hegel's lines about the Beautiful Soul from his Phenomenology: evil God is his gaze itself which perceives reality around itself as evil, as irredeemably

fallen. In other words, the “death of God” is not primarily the reconciliation between humanity and God, it is above all the reconciliation of God with himself – again, this is how “God himself is /involved in/ this”... Does, then, this mean that Balibar is simply wrong, i.e., that there are no symptomatic ambiguities and twists in the Hegelian topic of the negation of negation? I think Balibar is right, it is just that the ambiguity has to be located at a somewhat different place. Is the “death of death” what Hegel calls *Ungeschehenmachen*, the “undoing” of something that happens?

“The undoing of what has been done cannot take place in a sensible manner; but in a spiritual manner or inwardly, what has been done can be undone.”

But what about death of God as death of death? Even if we see the speculative truth of Holy Spirit as a *Gemeinde* in which faith coincides with its object, why does for ordinary believers (not speculative theologians) the appearance of externality persists, why do they remain transfixed on the Way of the Cross, on the sensual spectacle of Christ’s long suffering and death? We can “undo” this fascination in philosophical speculation, but “the undoing of what has been done cannot take place in a sensible manner,” which means that it persists as a non-conceptual moment keeping together the community of believers. (Hegel emphasizes that philosophy is only for the educated – for ordinary people, religion is the highest form of Spirit.) Is the image of suffering Christ, this “image to end all images,” also an “indivisible remainder,” and if yes, in what precise sense? Can it be united with a radical materialist perspective? Adrian Johnston noted:

“What if the ability to be radically skeptical, relativistic, or agnostic is afforded only to one who is omniscient and/or infinite (i.e., God)? Asked differently, what if, by attributing self-deception or self-doubt to God, Lacan means to place them beyond the reach of finite, mortal humans? What if the capacity to elevate oneself to one or more meta-levels over and above any initial first-order choice between theism and atheism, belief and unbelief, /.../ is reserved exclusively for a being that would be omnipotent and eternal?”

While I basically agree with Johnston, I would add two provisos. Yes, sceptic doubt implies supreme arrogance: in it, the subject assumes the safe distance of an external observer to who, everything appears relative, historically conditioned, etc. But, following Hegel, we should distinguish here between *Zweifel* (doubt in the sense of doubting something) and *Verzweiflung* (a much more radical existential doubt/despair which affects the very core of my being. By attributing self-doubt to god, god is humanized/finitized, caught in a radical despair which undermines his very divinity. The second proviso: for reasons explained elsewhere in my writings, I also claim that direct atheism is not possible – to arrive at it,

one has to pass through god’s self-destruction.

The Failed Negation of Negation

To orient ourselves in this mess, we should make a step beyond the ambiguity of “negation of negation” as it was formulated by Balibar (healing the wounds without any scars remaining; the reconciliation with wounds in their positive role), and add self-negation at its most radical: suicide. Can we imagine suicide as an emancipatory political act? The first association are here of course public suicides as a protest against foreign occupation, from Vietnam to Poland in the 1980s – there is no place here to deal with this, or with the fact that, by way of largely ignoring global warming, humanity is unwillingly committing a collective suicide. Let’s turn to more specific cases. In the last years a suicidal proposal aroused a wide debate in South Africa. Derek Hook reports how, in March 2016 Terblanche Delpont, a young white academic, sparked outrage at a Johannesburg conference at the University of the Witwatersrand, when he called on white people in South Africa “to commit suicide as an ethical act” – here are Delpont’s own words:

“The reality [in South Africa] is that most white people spend their whole lives only engaging black people in subservient positions – cleaners, gardeners, etc. My question is then how can a person not be racist if that’s the way they live their lives? The only way then for white people to become part of Africa is to not exist as white people anymore. If the goal is to dismantle white supremacy, and white supremacy is white culture and vice versa, then the goal has to be to dismantle white culture and ultimately white people themselves. The total integration into Africa by white people will also automatically then means the death of white people as white as a concept would not exist anymore.”

How, more concretely, are we to imagine the symbolic suicide of the South African Whites? Donald Moss proposed a simple but problematic (for me, at least) solution: the racist Whiteness is a parasitic formation which parasitizes on Whites themselves:

“Whiteness is a condition one first acquires and then one has—a malignant, parasitic-like condition to which “white” people have a particular susceptibility. The condition is foundational, generating characteristic ways of being in one’s body, in one’s mind, and in one’s world. Parasitic Whiteness renders its hosts’ appetites voracious, insatiable, and perverse. These deformed appetites particularly target nonwhite peoples. Once established, these appetites are nearly impossible to eliminate.”

To get rid of their racist stance, the whites have to get

rid of the parasitic whiteness which is not part of their substantial nature but just parasitizes on them, which means that, in getting rid of their racism, they do not lose the substance of their being – they even regain it, obliterating its distortion... I prefer to this easy way out Hook's comment (inspired by Lacanian theory):

"Delport's rhetorical and deliberately provocative suggestion is perhaps not as counter-intuitive or crazy as it at first sounds. Arguably, it is the gesture of giving up what one is – the shedding of narcissistic investments, and symbolic and fantasmatic identities – that proves a necessary first step to becoming what one is not, but might become. This is the transformative potential of anxiety that clinicians work so hard to facilitate, and that I think can also be discerned – however fleetingly – in the instances of white anxiety discussed above: the potentiality that a new – and hitherto unthinkable – form of identification is being unconsciously processed and negotiated."

What I nonetheless find problematic in these lines is the optimist turn: suicide does not mean the actual collective self-killing of the South African whites, it means a symbolic erasure of their identity which already points towards new forms of identity... I find it much more productive to establish a link between this idea of the whites' collective suicide and the idea of so-called afro-pessimism. Recall Fanon's claim that "the Negro is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly declining declivity": is the experience that grounds today's "afro-pessimism" not a similar one? Does the insistence of afro-pessimists that Black subordination is much more radical than that of other underprivileged groups (Asians, LGBT+, women...), i.e., that Blacks should not be put into the series with other forms of "colonization," not grounded in the act of assuming that one belongs to such a "zone of non-being"? This is why Fredric Jameson is right when he insists that one cannot understand class struggle in the US without taking into account anti-Black racism: any talk which equalizes white and Black proletarians is a fake. (A point to be noted here is that, when the young Gandhi protested against the white rule in South Africa, he ignored the plight of the Black majority and just demanded the inclusion of Indians into the privileged White block.)

So what if we turn Delport's suggestion, radical as it may appear, around and propose that it is the Blacks in South Africa who should commit a collective symbolic suicide, to shed their socio-symbolic identity which is profoundly marked by white domination and resistance to it, and which contains its own fantasies and even narcissistic investments of victimization. (In the US, the Blacks are right in using the term "Victim!" to insult their Black opponents.) One can thus

repeat exactly the same words: the Blacks need to perform "the gesture of giving up what one is – the shedding of narcissistic investments, and symbolic and fantasmatic identities – that proves a necessary first step to becoming what one is not, but might become." Consequently, I see afro-pessimism not just as recognition of dismal social reality but also and above all as something that announces "the potentiality that a new – and hitherto unthinkable – form of identification is being unconsciously processed and negotiated." To put it brutally, let's imagine that, in one way or another, all the Whites would disappear from South Africa – the ANC inefficiency and corruption would remain, and the poor black majority would find itself even more strongly dislocated, lacking the designated cause of its poverty... To revolutionize a system is never equal to just eliminating one of its parts, in the same way that the disappearance of Jews as the disturbing element never restores social harmony.

The key move has to be done by Blacks themselves - was Malcolm X not following this insight when he adopted X as his family name? The point of choosing X as his family name and thereby signalling that the slave traders who brought the enslaved Africans from their homeland brutally deprived them of their family and ethnic roots, of their entire cultural life-world, was not to mobilize the blacks to fight for the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely to seize the opening provided by X, an unknown new (lack of) identity engendered by the very process of slavery which made the African roots forever lost. The idea is that this X which deprives the blacks of their particular tradition offers a unique chance to redefine (reinvent) themselves, to freely form a new identity much more universal than white people's professed universality. To put it in Hook's terms, Malcolm X proposes for Blacks themselves to bring to the end their deracination with a gesture of symbolic suicide, the passage through zero-point, in order to free the space for a new identity. Such a gesture would render the White domination simply pointless, a solipsist dream, a game missing a partner with whom it can only be played. Was this not the reason why Malcolm X was treated as an enemy by all (opposed) sides in the conflict:

"At the time Malcolm spoke at the Audubon Ballroom on Feb. 21, 1965, he was a marked man — spied on by the F.B.I. and the police, denounced as a traitor by the Nation leadership, viscerally hated and beloved. Mr. Farrakhan declared him "worthy of death." A week before his assassination, his home in Queens was firebombed while he and his wife and four daughters slept inside."

One cannot but note the cruel irony of the fact that – although, as is well known, Malcolm X found this new identity in the universalism of Islam – he was (in all probability) killed on the order of the organization called The Nation of

Islam, an organization which used Islam to serve its limited ethnic identity:

“Was Malcolm your traitor or ours? And if we dealt with him like a nation deals with a traitor, what the hell business is it of yours? You just shut your mouth, and stay out of it. Because in the future, we gonna become a nation. And a nation gotta be able to deal with traitors and cutthroats and turncoats. The white man deals with his. The Jews deal with theirs.”

In short, Malcolm was killed because he blurred the clear line that separated “ours” from “yours” – he was killed to prevent the Blacks to commit the symbolic suicide that would open up the path to (not only) their emancipation. And even today we continue to live in the shadow of this failed suicide which keeps the Blacks in their subordinate position. The topic of failed suicide deserves a special attention: as it was pointed out by Alenka Zupančič, it presents an exemplary case of the “negation of negation” as a failure of negation itself. One of its most desperate versions is *Still Alice* (2014, written and directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, based on the novel by Lisa Genova). It stars Julianne Moore as Alice Howland, a linguistics professor diagnosed with familial Alzheimer’s disease shortly after her 50th birthday. As Alice’s memory begins to fade, she memorizes words and sets a series of personal questions on her phone, which she answers every morning, plus she records a video message instructing her future self to commit suicide by overdosing on the pills when she can no longer answer the personal questions. Sometime later, with her disease advancing, Alice opens the video with the suicide instructions; with some difficulty, she finds the pills and is about to swallow them, but when she is interrupted by the arrival of her caregiver, she drops the pills on the floor and forgets what she was doing – so even her suicide fails... The paradox is here that Alice’s suicide fails because of the very illness she wanted to escape from through it.

Is a hint in this direction (of “negation of negation” as the failed negation) not clearly discernible already in Freud’s theory of dreams, symptoms, slips of tongue, and other forms of the “return of the repressed”: something repressed (negated, excluded from consciousness) returns as a broken/distorted cyphered message in which negation is negated, but not in a triumphant “synthesis” – it returns as a fragmentary compromise which is neither here nor there... But this “triad” is not the whole story: what complicates it is that we should add another moment at the beginning: what Freud the “primordial repression /Ur-Verdraengung/”.

One of the best indicators of the dimension which resists the pseudo-Hegelian understanding of psychoanalytic treatment as the process of the patient’s appropriation of repressed content is the paradox of perversion in the

Freudian theoretical edifice: perversion demonstrates the insufficiency of the simple logic of transgression. The standard wisdom tells us that perverts practice (do) what hysterics only dream about (doing), i.e., “everything is allowed” in perversion, a perverts openly actualizes all repressed content – and nonetheless, as Freud emphasizes, nowhere is repression as strong as in perversion, a fact more than confirmed by our late-capitalist reality in which total sexual permissiveness causes anxiety and impotence or frigidity instead of liberation. This repression of repression which occurs in perverse subjectivity is correlative to the prohibition of prohibition: it may appear that in perversion “everything is permitted,” all repressed dirty fantasies can be brought out without impediments; however, what is rendered invisible in this space of free flow of “perversities” is the very trauma, the Real of a basic impossibility, the gap which this flow tries to obfuscate. This compels us to draw a distinction between the repressed content and the form of repression: the form remains operative even after the content is no longer repressed – in short, the subject can fully appropriate the repressed content, but repression remains. Why? Commenting on a short dream of one of his patients (a woman who first refused altogether to tell Freud the dream “because it was so indistinct and muddled”) which revealed itself to refer to the fact that the patient was pregnant but was in doubts as to who is the baby’s father (i.e., the parenthood was “indistinct and muddled”), Freud draws a key dialectical conclusion:

“the lack of clarity shown by the dream was a part of the material which instigated the dream: part of this material, that is, was represented in the form of the dream. The form of a dream or the form in which it is dreamt is used with quite surprising frequency for representing its concealed subject-matter.”

The gap between form and content is here properly dialectical, in contrast to the transcendental gap whose point is that every content appears within an a priori formal frame, and we should always be aware of the invisible transcendental frame which “constitutes” the content we perceive – or, in structural terms, we should distinguish between elements and formal places these elements occupy. We only attain the level of proper dialectical analysis of a form when we conceive a certain formal procedure not as expressing a certain aspect of the (narrative) content, but as marking/signaling the part of content that is excluded from the explicit narrative line, so that - therein resides the proper theoretical point - if we want to reconstruct “all” of the narrative content, we must reach beyond the explicit narrative content as such, and include some formal features which act as the stand-in for the “repressed” aspect of the content. To take the well-known elementary example from the analysis of melodramas: the emotional excess that cannot express itself directly in the narrative line, finds its outlet in

the ridiculously sentimental musical accompaniment or in other formal features. In this respect, melodramas are to be opposed to Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*: in both cases, we are dealing with the tension between form and content, while in *Breaking the Waves*, the excess is located in the content (the subdued pseudo-documentary form makes palpable the excessive content).

From Finitude to Immortality

However, insofar as we are dealing here with the properly dialectical mediation between form and content, we should not reduce primordial repression only to the form of a gap: something insists, a weird positivity of an excessive »content« not only impervious to negation, but even produced by the very process of redoubled (self-relating) negation. Consequently, this something is not simply a remainder of the pre-symbolic real that resists symbolic negation, but a spectral X called by Lacan *objet a* surplus-enjoyment. One should mobilize here Lacan's key distinction between pleasure (*Lust*, *plaisir*) and enjoyment (*Geniessen*, *jouissance*): what is "beyond the pleasure principle" is enjoyment itself, it is drive as such. The basic paradox of *jouissance* is that it is both impossible and unavoidable: it is never fully achieved, always missed, but, simultaneously, we never can get rid of it - every renunciation of enjoyment generates an enjoyment in renunciation, every obstacle to desire generates a desire for obstacle, etc. This reversal provides the minimal definition of the surplus-enjoyment: it involves the paradoxical "pleasure in pain". That is to say, when Lacan uses the term *plus-de-jouir*, one has to ask a naive, but crucial question: in what does this surplus consist? Is it merely a qualitative increase of ordinary pleasure? The ambiguity of the French expression is decisive here: it can mean "surplus of enjoyment" as well as "no enjoyment" - the surplus of enjoyment over mere pleasure is generated by the presence of the very opposite of pleasure, i.e. pain; it is the part of *jouissance* which resists being contained by the homeostasis, by the pleasure principle. Or, it is the excess of pleasure produced by »repression« itself, which is why we lose it if we abolish repression. This is what Herbert Marcuse, in his *Eros and Civilization*, misses when he proposes a distinction between "basic repression" ("the 'modifications' of the instincts necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in civilization") and "surplus-repression" ("the restrictions necessitated by social domination"):

"while any form of the reality principle demands a considerable degree and scope of repressive control over the instincts, the specific historical institutions of the reality principle and the specific interests of domination introduce additional controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association. These additional controls arising from the specific institutions of domination are what we

denote as surplus-repression."

Marcuse enumerates as examples of surplus-repression "the modifications and deflections of instinctual energy necessitated by the perpetuation of the monogamic-patriarchal family, or by a hierarchical division of labor, or by public control over the individual's private existence." Although he concedes that basic and surplus-repression are *de facto* inextricably intertwined, one should go a step further and render problematic their very conceptual distinction: it is the paradox of libidinal economy that surplus/excess is necessary for the very "basic" functioning - why? An ideological edifice "bribes" subjects to accept "repression"/renunciation by way of offering as surplus-enjoyment (Lacan's *plus-de-jouir*), and this surplus-enjoyment is an enjoyment generated by the very "excessive" renunciation to enjoyment - surplus-enjoyment is by definition enjoyment-in-pain. (Its paradigmatic case is the Fascist call "Renounce corrupt pleasures! Sacrifice yourself for your country!", a call which promises an obscene enjoyment brought about by this very renunciation.) One thus cannot have only "basic" repression without the surplus-repression, since it is the very enjoyment generated by the surplus-repression which renders the "basic" repression palpable to the subjects. The paradox is thus a kind of "less is more" we are dealing with here: "more" repression is less traumatic, more easily acceptable, than less. When repression is diminished, the lesser degree of repression is much more difficult to endure and provokes rebellion. (This may be one of the reasons why revolutions break out not when oppression is at its worst, but when it diminishes to a more "reasonable" and "rational" level - this diminishing deprives repression of the aura which makes it acceptable.)

This is why we should also reject Marcuse's idea of a "non-repressive desublimation" as the goal of sexual emancipation. If we follow Lacan's precise definition of sublimation, then Marcuse's idea of "liberated persons" who are able to experience "the non-repressive desublimation of resexualizing their polymorphously perverse bodies" is a utopian nonsense - why? For Lacan, "repressive desublimation" cannot be opposed to non-repressive desublimation because desublimation is AS SUCH repressive, which is why perversion in which the subject actualizes its dirtiest fantasies) is, as Lacan pointed out, the hidden part of any oppressive power. For Lacan, sexual drive as such relies on sublimation: sublimation elevates an ordinary worldly object to the level of the impossible Thing - this is how sublimation sexualizes an ordinary object. So when Johnston claims that "Freudian sublimation is nothing other than the achievement of satisfaction in the face of aim-inhibition," we should NOT read this in the ordinary sense of replacing a direct sexual object or act by a desexualized activity. Lacan reads sublimation in the Kantian way: what is prohibited in

sublimation is not the direct object but the impossible Thing – that’s the basic paradox here: what is prohibited is already in itself impossible-to-reach. In sublimation, we shift from one to another object to catch the elusive Thing which eludes already the direct object.

To get the paradoxical logic of “less is more,” it is crucial to distinguish symbolic castration from the real castration (a penis – or testicles - is actually cut off) and the imaginary castration in which the loss is just imagined (as in the case of a woman imagining she once had a penis and lost it). In the symbolic castration, nothing happens in (bodily) reality, all that happens is that phallus itself (as the moment of bodily excess) becomes a signifier of “castration,” of its lack/impotence. In this sense, social authority really is “phallic” insofar as it has the effect of symbolic castration on its bearer: if, say, I am a king, I have to accept that the ritual of investiture makes me a king, that my authority is embodied in the insignia I wear, so that my authority is in some sense external to me as a person in my miserable reality. As Lacan put it, only a psychotic is a king who thinks he is as king (or a father who is a father) by his nature, as he is, without the processes of symbolic investiture. This is why being-a-father is by definition a failure: no “empirical” father can live up to his symbolic function, to his title. How can I, if I am invested with such an authority, live with this gap without obfuscating it through psychotic direct identification of my symbolic status with my reality?

And this is why, from the strict Freudian standpoint, the human finitude (symbolic castration) and immortality (death drive) are the two sides of the same operation, i.e., it’s not that the substance of life, the immortal Jouissance-Thing, is “castrated” by the arrival of the symbolic order. As in the case of lack and excess, the structure is that of parallax: the undead Thing is the remainder of castration, it is generated by castration, and vice versa, there is no “pure” castration, castration itself is sustained by the immortal excess which eludes it. Castration and excess are not two different entities, but the front and the back of one and the same entity, that is, one and the same entity inscribed onto the two surfaces of a Möbius strip. The unity of limitation and immortality can now be clearly formulated: an entity finds its peace and completion in fitting its finite contours (form), so what pushes it beyond its finite form is the very fact that it cannot achieve it, that it cannot be what it is, that it is marked by an irreducible impossibility, thwarted in its core - it is on behalf of this immanent and constitutive obstacle that a thing persists beyond its “death.” Recall Hamlet’s father: why does he return as a ghost after his natural death? Because of the gap between his natural death and his symbolic death, i.e., because he died in the flower of his sins, unable to find peace in death, to enact his symbolic death (settlement of accounts).

This brings us back to the third form of the “negation of negation”: one of the determinations of modernity is that, in it, a specific form of the negation of negation arises: far from the triumphant reversal of negativity into a new positivity, this “negation of negation” means that even negation (our striving to reach the bottom, the zero-point) fails. Not only are we not immortal but we are even not mortal, we fail in that endeavour to disappear, we survive in the guise of the obscene immortality of the “undead” (living dead). Not only do we fail in our pursuit of happiness, we even fail in our pursuit of unhappiness, our attempts to ruin our life produce small unexpected bits of miserable happiness, of surplus-enjoyment. In old Yugoslavia policemen were the butt of jokes as stupid and corrupted; in one of these jokes, a policeman returns home unexpectedly and finds his wife alone in bed, half-naked and aroused; he suspects a lover is hiding beneath the big bed, gets on his knees and looks beneath. After a couple of seconds, he raises up with a satisfied expression, just mumbling “Everything OK, nobody is there!”, while quickly pushing a couple of banknotes into the pocket of his trousers... This is how in our daily lives accepting failure is paid by the misery of some form of surplus-enjoyment.

In social life, not only do most of us fail to achieve social success and slide slowly towards some form of proletarianization, we even fail in this tendency towards the bottom of the social scale: instead of becoming full proletarians who have nothing (to lose but their chains), we somehow maintain a minimum of social status. Perhaps, therein resides the impasse of today’s Western radical Leftists who, disappointed at the lack of “true proletariat” in their own country, desperately search for an ersatz proletariat which will mobilize itself as a revolutionary agent instead of “our” corrupted and inert working class (the most popular candidate is lately nomadic immigrants). Is this weird “downward negation of negation” really what escapes Hegel in his obsession with the forward march of the spirit? What if this “downward negation of negation” is rather the true secret of the Hegelian dialectical process? It is along these lines that one should reread Hegel backwards, from the perspective of Samuel Beckett’s late short texts and plays which all deal with the problem of how to go on when the game is over, when it has reached its endpoint. Hegel is not simply the thinker of closure, of the closed circle of the end of history in Absolute Knowing, but also the thinker of the terrible void of inertia when, after “the system is closed,” nothing (that we can think) happens although “the time goes on.”

But what if the choice between finitude and immortality is false? What if finitude and immortality, like lack and excess, also form a parallax couple, what if they are the same from a different point of view? What if immortality is an object that is a remainder/excess over finitude, what if finitude is

an attempt to escape from the excess of immortality? What if Kierkegaard was right here, but for the wrong reason, when he also understood the claim that we, humans, are just mortal beings who disappear after their biological death as an easy way to escape the ethical responsibility that comes with the immortal soul? He was right for the wrong reason insofar as he equated immortality with the divine and ethical part of a human being—but there is another immortality. What Cantor did for infinity, we should do for immortality, and assert the multiplicity of immortalities: the Badiouian noble immortality/infinity of the deployment of an Event (as opposed to the finitude of a human animal) comes after a more basic form of immortality which resides in what Lacan calls the Sadean fundamental fantasy: the fantasy of another, ethereal body of the victim, which can be tortured indefinitely and nonetheless magically retains its beauty (recall the Sadean figure of the young girl sustaining endless humiliations and mutilations from her depraved torturer and somehow mysteriously surviving it all intact, in the same way Tom and Jerry and other cartoon heroes survive all their ridiculous ordeals intact). In this form, the comical and the disgustingly terrifying (recall different versions of the “undead”—zombies, vampires, etc.—in popular culture) are inextricably connected. (Therein resides the point of proper

burial, from Antigone to Hamlet: to prevent the dead from returning in the guise of this obscene immortality. . .)

So, again, the idea of the “negation of negation” as a failure is not strange to Hegel. In one of the most famous passages in his *Phenomenology*, the dialectic of master and servant, he imagines the confrontation of the two self-consciousnesses engaged in the struggle to life and death; each side is ready to go to the end in risking its life, but if they both persist to the end, there is no winner – one dies, the other survives but without another to recognize it. The whole history of freedom and recognition – in short, the whole history tout court, the whole of human culture – can take place only with an original compromise: in the eye to eye confrontation, one side (the future servant) blinks, averts its gaze, is not ready to go to the end.

Back to Schelling and Hegel, for Hegel, the “indivisible remainder” of the dialectical process is the obscene undeadness, the outcome of the failed negation of negation, what survives the radical self-negation. It is the excess of this obscene undeadness which pulverizes from within all binary oppositions.

