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De Negatione: What Does It Mean to Say No?

Abstract
The article deals with the history of the concept of negativity in western thought. While reproducing the classical approaches in all essential details, the text exceeds the encyclopedia format of encyclopedia since it seeks to describe and systematize the main features of negation as a logical and linguistic operator: its asymmetry with affirmation; its incompletion and infinity; its latency in alternation with hyperbolic repetition. Further, in its reliance on Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, the article emphasizes the crucial role of inversion (correlative, contrary or real opposition) as a scheme and practical realization of negation. The history of negation is then anchored in the socio-political context, where it is shown to be a necessary form of subjectivization in the late modernity, with its excess of inescapable being.

Keywords
Aristotle, contradiction, contrariness, dialectics, Hegel, Kant, negativity.

I. The Paradoxes of Negation: *In Verbo* and *In Re*

Only saying "no" keeps us alive and sane. *No* to the cynicism of the ruling ideology, to the brutal egoism of a subject left desperate by the dissolution of social links, to the propaganda of aura and anxiety that attacks us in the media, from the usurped space of public sociability. No to the arrogant formalism of the west and the cowardly nationalism of the east. Unfortunately, none of these things disappear if we deny them, oppose them, and publicly criticize them. It is in a way morally beneficial to ignore them and live *as though* the slogans of democracy, human rights, and Enlightenment were actually the only valid standards of today's society. Because open struggle against corruption and technocracy risks affirming and legitimizing them as such, as in Russia, where everyone enjoys chastising the ubiquitous corruption of business and government agencies in such a way that corruption, for many, becomes tolerable.

The modern subject establishes itself through emancipation from all sorts of tyranny, from prejudice, from tradition, and even from nature. Moreover, in its Cartesian or Kantian versions, and in its revolutionary incarnations, it posits an absolute rupture with the past, which represents non-freedom and obscurity, in favor of a *vita nuova,* and delimits itself from the world of inanimate objects through a gesture of doubt. Needless to say, this negation, as inscribed in critiques and constitutions, remains largely a symbolic gesture: tyrannical institutions fail to dissolve at the word of intellectuals, and what is worse, a new despotism emerges in the person of the enlightened, negating subject who revisits on nature the fear it had once imposed on it.

The concept of negativity emphasizes the peculiarity of negation as a linguistic and logical operator. This is not to say that negativity is a purely linguistic or logical phenomenon, but that our understanding of it proceeds from linguistic negation.

There are two fundamental paradoxes in the use of negation.

First, there is a contradiction between the *subjective* and *objective* aspects of saying "no."

1. Subjective and Objective Negation

"No" is a way of refuting a previous statement or a proposition evoked in the very same statement or sometimes even a name. But to refute means, objectively, to express the non-being of this or that situation or thing. If it does not exist, then how could it have come to be expressed, even falsely? Where does the lie come from? To be consistent, a negation must refute not only the proposition that is its object but also the propo-

sition's very enunciation. Quite often, when saying "no," we raise our voice, gesticulate, and repeat the negation, because the enunciation itself sounds wild. This happens often when different ideologies and language games clash. Imagine you meet a relative at a family party, and he or she starts to convince you it was the CIA who blew up the Twin Towers, that Jews indeed control a large part of world finance (and deserve respect for this accomplishment) or something of the sort. Or a natural scientist colleague explains to you that religious doctrines or happiness originates in genes. Notably, we do not have *evidence* to refute these claims, since a properly negative proposition does not build on positive facts but refers to an *infinite*, or at least overly large, quantity of such facts. The statements in question are so wrong we question the very fact of their enunciation. But in this case, our negative statement also sounds stupid. ("It is hard to prove you are not a camel," as the Russian proverb goes.)

An accomplished negation would abolish the very need for it: this is why "negativity" is so often understood ontologically. A negating subject naturally aspires to step outside language and destroy the very object it negates (in cases when it actually exists, although it should not) or shut up interlocutors who evoke it. Because otherwise the subject falls into contradiction. Another solution, however, is to emphasize *only* the objective and thus *theoretical* function of negation, by using a defense mechanism: to *ignore* what you have negated even if it actually continues its existence. In his essay "Fetishism" (1974: XXI, 149–157), Freud introduces the concept of "disavowal" (*Verleugnung*), through which fetishists ignore truths they know very well. Thus, they cannot accept the fact of the mother's castration (and, hence, the nonexistence of an all-powerful real Other), so they split their own world into two: into a world where the mother is castrated, and another where she is not. Thus, the subject behaves "as if" the mother were not castrated, interpreting its subjective, will-driven negation objectively, theoretically. The fact of negation as a subjective act stays unconscious as such. However (and this is quite characteristic), it finds practical expression in the *positive* instance of a fetish and a set of ritualistic practices around the fetish. Unable to appear directly, negation appears in a positivized fashion.

A different version of negation as neurotic self-deception appears in Freud's earlier essay "Die Verneinung" ("Negation" or "Denegation") (1974: XIX, 233–240). Here, Freud analyzes a negation that is unable to actually deny its object and instead betrays the subject's unconscious (or not quite conscious) intention. Thus, when a psychoanalytic patient says of a woman in a dream, "This was not my mother," they actually want to say it was their mother but ward off the thought through the use of negation. Objectively and theoretically speaking, this was not the mother, period. But the very *need* to deny contradicts this objective content and manifests the presence of two opposite forces within the subject's psyche. In this case (unlike the case of fetishism), negation *does* find adequate

expression, but the subject still does not reflect on it, wanting it to be a naïve, objective assertion, while the analyst recognizes the presence of a subjective force.

Kant already had a notion of this tension in the meaning of negation. In his "Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy" (1992), Kant distinguishes between *nihil negativum* and *nihil privativum*. Both are objective, in the sense they are correlates of a negative judgment. But this judgment has two meanings. In the first sense of negation (Kant calls it "logical repugnancy"), we refer to the absence of a thing or situation ("the room is not dark"). In the second sense ("real repugnancy"), there is *something* that resists, or goes in the opposite direction from, what we deny (*nihil privativum*, negation of a particular thing—Kant's terminology stems from the gradual conflation, among the scholastics, of Aristotelian *privation* with *contrariety*) (Hübener 1975). For instance, if we feel displeasure, this does not mean only that we do not experience any pleasure at this moment. This means that we experience a strong negative emotion. So it is not really an absence that is meant. But this may be expressed with the same negative particle as the logical repugnancy ("I do *not* like it"). In the case of logical negation, negating just means dismissing, in the case of expressing privation, the *negation* itself is emphasized, and is referred to as an objective *force.* For Kant, *nihil negativum* is thus a fact of logic, and ultimately of the *subject*, while *nihil privativum* is truly *objective.* But in the terms of this paper, which are closer to Hegel's, I can give an opposite interpretation of this division. N*ihil negativum,* from the subject's point of view, is the naïve, objective contemplation of an absence, while *nihil privativum* is the objective reflection of the act of negation itself: our hypothesis is not merely wrong, the thing is not just absent, but our act of negation is caused and paralleled by a real force in the world.

A negative expression thus contradicts itself by its very enunciation or, in other words, the *subjective* side of negation contradicts its *objective* side. If extraterrestrials or the Jewish conspiracy does not exist, then why are you discussing them at all? In "Die Verneinung" (1974: XIX, 235–239), Freud analyzed this paradox seeing it as sign of a *psychological* ambivalence but emphasizes a unique role of a *symbol* of negation for expressing this ambivalence.

> [T]he performance of the function of judgment is not made possible until the creation of the symbol of negation has endowed thinking with a first measure of freedom from the consequences of repression and, with it, from the compulsion of the pleasure principle. (Freud 1974: XIX, 239)

This symbolic distancing does not, however, allow the negation and the negated content to become manifest: negative expression is a strange function that, even while *expressing* the repression, still leaves it unconscious.

In Freud, like later in Lacan's extensive writing on negation (to be reviewed below), the negative expression is the very focus of what he called a "symbolic" function. Just recently, the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno, in his ongoing and not yet fully available work on negation, rightly wrote that

> Verbal language distinguishes itself from other communicative codes, as well as from cognitive prelinguistic performance, because it is able to negate any type of semantic content. Language inoculates negativity into the life of the species. (Virno 2008: 176)

Virno does not quote Freud or Lacan (attributing, and gives an anthropological naturalistic account of negation as an operation of blocking the mirror neurons and thus hindering empathy. I would add that it is a capacity of resistance to linguistic suggestion (Porshnev 1974), but in any event the function and logic of negation cannot be limited to its intersubjective effects.

In symbolic activity, the negative expression is often *latent* (it is important that neoliberalism is an objectively horrible policy, not that we as social-democratic intellectuals oppose it), but in other cases, when others contest the objective negation, it is, on the contrary, repeated and emphasized. There is a dialectic inscribed in the very use of negation. As the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen demonstrated in his now-unsurpassed book-length study of Indo-European linguistic expression (Jespersen 2010), linguistic negation tends to be used enclitically, without emphasis, to be monosyllabic. It therefore gradually begins to fail its actual function. Linguistic development thus shows the repeated reinforcement of negation by various positively meant words, such as "one" (the Latin *non* and the English *no*), "step" (the French *pas*), etc.

> The negative adverb very often is rather weakly stressed, because some other word in the same sentence receives the strong stress of contrast, the chief use of a negative statement being to contradict and to point a contrast. (Jespersen 2010: 3)

The negation is therefore in need of reinforcement:

> There are various ways of strengthening the negatives. Sometimes it seems as if the essential thing were only to increase phonetical bulk of the adverb by an addition of no particular meaning, as when Latin *non* was preferred to *ne* […] But in most cases the addition serves to make the negative more impressive as being more vivid or picturesque, generally through an exaggeration, as when substantives meaning something very small are used as subjuncts. (Jespersen 2010: 7)

Note the emphasis on quantitative increase and polar contrariety: Aristotle, as we will see, also thinks that negation is essentially opposi-

tion and singles out the "contrary" as that which is most different, opposition pushed to the extreme.

Often, as in French, the new positive negation (*pas*, *plus*) is accentuated *after* the proposition, while the anticipatory *ne* remains without accent. In German, only the final, accentuated *nicht* has remained, which makes a German negative phrase intelligible only retroactively, from the end, so that the meaning of such phrases undergoes an inversion to the contrary in the process of reading them (*Ich besuche meinen Bruder nicht*). These reinforcing negative expressions stage a polemic within the statement, while the early enclitical negation is "ashamed" of itself, so to speak, and has a *privative* effect: the negated predicate is affirmed to the contrary.

For a theoretical treatment of the ambivalence between subjective and objective negation, we can examine, again, Freud's theory of fetishism. The fetishist, argues Freud, *disavows* fundamental facts of life, whose paradigm (in Freud) is the castration of the Mother. This disavowal is not an active negation, but rather feigned ignorance. However, negativity does acquire an existence in the figure of the fetish: by its positive existence per se, this *object* obscures the subject's unconscious negative activity. The reason why the negation does, in spite of everything, acquire being is the fact that fantasy does border on reality, and the subject needs some force and evidence to perform its delimitation, to keep denying reality from the standpoint of fantasy. The fetish is thus a chiasmatic interweaving of fantasy and reality that provides a fulcrum for negation.

In his 1929 lecture at the University of Freiburg, "What Is Metaphysics?," Heidegger broaches the theme of negativity by ironically inverting the words of Hyppolite Taine: in scientific existence, "[t]hat to which the relation to the world refers are being themselves—and nothing besides" (Heidegger 1977: 97). Refuted for some reason, this "nothing besides," says Heidegger, is a sign that there is some strange remainder calling for its obstinate rejection. (In this, modern positivists closely resemble Parmenides, while Heidegger resembles Democritus.) In fact, this "nothing besides" is a proper name of a special entity, "the nothing." Using what Aristotle calls an "infinite name"—"the nothing"—Heidegger describes the affect of the anguish (*Angst*) that paradoxically gives humans a negative intuition of the universe. Harking back to the Neoplatonic mystics and at the same time mobilizing the phenomenological argumentation, Heidegger rejects Hegel's attempt to subjectivize negativity and insists that negation, by definition secondary to affirmation and dependent on it, cannot therefore be deduced from a voluntary or linguistic act (which is by definition affirmative) but must proceed from an intentional object towards which this act is oriented. This object happens to be "the nothing."

The positivists who ignore the nothing use nothing as an *objective* negation. They do not reflect on why they use negation here and what its

impossible object is. Heidegger emphasizes their latent subjective denial and the implicit negative *affect* of anguish. But, in another turn, he finds the objective correlate of this subjective attitude in the special objectless object that the nothing is. Still, in our terms, this nothing is an instance of subjective or practical negation, because it represents not the denied (false, insignificant, irregular, etc.) object, but *negativity* itself, embodied ontologically, so to speak.

It is clear from the above that being (qua nothing) is fragile and unstable, and is always already *lost*. As soon as we define nothing as "the nothing," it tends to present itself as one more substance and thus lose its transcendent character. "The nothing" thus simultaneously designates exhaustion and excess. Still, despite its intangibility, the nothing may signal itself to a human being in the disposition of anxiety, a disposition characterized by a certain *shrinking back*, by *recoil* [*Zurückweichen*] and *repulsion* [*Abweisung*]:

> The nothing itself does not attract; it is essentially repelling [*abweisend*]. But this repulsion is itself as such a parting gesture toward beings that are submerging as a whole. (Heidegger 1977: 105)

It is logical that a negative substance provokes a negative subjective attitude. But seen in this light, "anguish" seems a problematic concept, because it assumes a negative shrinking from the negative ground that the nothing is. It is imaginable that we could accept nothingness with gratitude, love it, be faithful to it, etc. So the fact that we are anxious about it and thus tend to avoid it or even repress it, is implicitly a product of a *double negation,* not only of the phenomenological intention of nothingness. And this is what Heidegger's positivists, who deny the nothing, represent: they are anxious, and they shrink from their anguish. Why not exercise nothingness actively, by taking its negativity on oneself in active destruction or careful protection rather than contemplative denial? Heidegger comes close to these ideas in his later theory of *Gelassenheit*.

The interplay of subjective and objective negation leads to a peculiar dialectic of the negative that has many quite practical historical expressions. A recent example is Carl Schmitt's theory of the enemy. In his earlier work (1927), Schmitt tried to elaborate the formal criterion of the political, defining it as the "distinction between friend and enemy," where the enemy is someone whom, in the extreme case, one would physically destroy (Schmitt 1996). In the logical terms of Aristotle and Hegel, which I will discuss below, we are dealing here with a contrary or correlate opposition, which can develop into a contradiction. Schmitt intended this distinction, against the "pacifist" liberal discourse, as a plea for recognizing enmity and enemies as a normal fact of life. The pacifist ideology, he claimed already then, does not annul enmity, but makes it more violent because it is unconscious. Therefore later, after the experience of the

Second World War, Schmitt introduces the concept of "absolute enemy" (Schmitt 2004: 64–68). The absolute enemy is not a more extreme or hateful enemy: the ordinary enemy is that already. The absolute enemy, for the late Schmitt, is killed not because it is recognized as such, but precisely because it is not: this is an enemy who should not have even existed (whether in the pacifist universe or the universe of ordinary friends and enemies). Where do enemies come from if there are no longer any enemies? How can there be an enemy who does not declare war, who does not have a legal representative, an ideology, etc.? If such an enemy (a guerrilla, for instance) appears, then it is destroyed in a violent manner, as an outlaw, "terrorist," enemy of mankind, etc.: a sense of astonishment is mixed with the hatred one feels. The movement from ordinary enemy to absolute enemy is a movement of dialectical reflection, but in our terms we would say that the negation was meant objectively, as *nihil negativum*, and its subjective, voluntary aspect (I do not want this enemy to exist, but it does exist) was ignored. As a result of this naiveté, the actual appearance of real negativity provokes the repressive rage of a new negation (negation of negation) that is conscious this time, but still appears as an exceptional operation to make the world accord with theory. Real negativity is still guided here by the naïve blindness of the logical, theoretical negation: I kill you because you *should not exist*. (The affinity between Schmitt's ideas and Lacan's doctrines of foreclosure and the second death is apparent.)

In summary, a negative statement can be read as the expression of an objective privation, when something that could and maybe should happen, does not happen. Or the same statement can be read as an energetic aggressive gesture by the subject, who thereby affirms its autonomy and opposes its existential linguistic act to the universal content it expresses. Lacan, whom I will discuss below, draws attention to this breakthrough of existential subjectivity, and shows that it often happens via a redoubled negation. But such a repeated, redoubled negation can sometimes lead not even to a two-tiered negation as in the French *ne pas*, but to a full-scale logical contradiction of the "negation of negation", so that the logic of negative expression actually goes against formal logic. The oscillation of negation between a proposition's content (the thought it expresses) and the external gesture of its de-position, leads to a clash between language and logic.

Hence the *second* major paradox of negativity, consisting in the ambivalence of double negation.

2. Negation of Negation

Repeating, reiterating the negation does not, indeed, necessarily help make it more convincing. As the English poet Philip Sidney wrote in the sixteenth century, at the inception of modernity,

> Oh grammar rules, oh now your virtues show
> So children still read you with awefull eyes,
> As my young dove may in your precepts wise
> Her grant to me, by her own virtue know.
> For late, with heart most high, with eyes most low,
> I crav'd the thing which ever she denies:
> She, lightning Love, displaying Venus' skies,
> Lest once should not be heard, twice said, "No, No."
> Sing then, my Muse, now *Io Paean* sing,
> Heav'n's envy not at my high triumphing:
> But grammar's force with sweet success confirm:
> For grammar says (oh this, dear Stella, weigh,)
> For grammar says (to grammar who says nay?)
> That in one speech two negatives affirm.
> (Sidney 2003)

In the nineteenth century, Hegel famously endowed double negation with a transformative capacity: the resulting affirmation does not equal a simple "yes," but renders the action in question neutralized and sublimated: even the reward desired by Sidney would now lose immediacy and be a conscious, meaningful surrender. Hegel developed the concept of the *negation of negation*, which does not mean a restoration of immediacy and annulment of negation, but a reaffirmation of the original statement on a new level.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel does not yet employ the notion of double negation, but its logic is already present. Negation is the subject's capacity to step out of objective determinations and affirm its freedom. But such negation is always already a negation of *negation*: as a subjective act, it also objectively exposes the hidden negativity of determinate "objective" reality: this "reality" is in fact a product of separation and limitation. The subject's abstract "understanding" (*Verständnis*) reproduces this determinate world, without being conscious of the implicit negativity that is its hidden condition. Thus, a new, subjective negation is needed, which means both an overcoming of this abstract negativity and a continuation of its latent destructive potential, which the subject renders apparent. As Slavoj Žižek rightly comments,

> The shift from negation to the negation of negation is […] a shift from the objective to the subjective dimension: in direct negation, the subject observes a change in the object (its disintegration, its passage into its opposite), while in the negation of negation, the subject includes itself in the process, taking into account how the process it is observing affects its own position. […] Such a reading of the negation of negation runs counter to the commonly held notion according to which the first negation is the splitting or particularization of the inner essence, its externalization, and the second negation the overcoming of that split. (Žižek 2012: 250)

For Hegel, all determinate things, and their concepts, are limitations of the *universum*. These limitations are always arbitrary to some extent, and so things are inconsistent, self-contradictory. This self-contradiction draws them into *motion,* and this motion always has something of a historical movement through which they do not merely change place, but are internally transformed by changes to any of their seemingly external predicates. Hence the right we have to apply logical concepts, negation being the central one, ontologically. If we suspend the external determination of time and place from our factual propositions, we will get a system of logical contradictions. Time and space are, as we would now say, fetishistic operators that allow us to pretend these contradictions do not exist, to disavow them.

> The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole. (Hegel 1977: 2)

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel introduces and develops the notion of the negation of negation. Used abundantly, this formula is particularly important for defining the Something (*Etwas*) and its infinity, in the "Doctrine of Being," and the Concept, in the "Doctrine of the Concept." The negation of negation is an affirmation, not in the trivial sense of restoring a status quo, but in the sense of what Hegel calls "mediation." The Something is a negation of negation because any determination of a thing puts it into a relationship with something external to it: it is defined by *predicates* and distinguished by them from some other things. Such determination is negation. Hegel relies on Spinoza's formula *omnis determinatio est negatio*: any specific thing, with its qualities, is a product of negation; it is carved out of the infinite. But this does not mean that the thing disappears: it differentiates itself once more from its predicates and establishes itself in its self-identity "in-itself." Thus, the thing exists through a double movement (mediation) of considering and pushing itself away from what it is not. As Hegel writes,

> [I]n so far as the in-itselfness is the non-being of the otherness that is contained in it but is at the same time also distinct as existent, something is itself negation, the ceasing to be of an other in it; it is posited as behaving negatively in relation to the other and in so doing preserving itself. This other, the in-itselfness of the something as negation of the

> negation, is the something's *being-in-itself*, and this sublation is as simple negation at the same time *in it*, namely, as its negation of the other something external to it. (Hegel 2010: 98)

As such, this double negation is still "objective," in our terms, and is therefore vanishing: we tend to dismiss external objects and predicates in the process of affirming a thing. The abstract understanding sees here a trivial self-identity in the sense of the law of identity ("A cannot be A and not-A at the same time"; see Hegel 2010: 360). But in fact, as Hegel shows, this movement comes to posit negativity as such—the truth of a thing is its "limit": "Finite things *are*, but in their reference to themselves they refer to themselves *negatively*—in this very self-reference they propel themselves beyond themselves, beyond their being. They *are*, but the truth of this being is (as in Latin) their *finis*, their *end*" (Hegel 2010: 101). This is one of the passages in Hegel's philosophy that supports its twentieth-century interpretation by Marcuse as a "negative dialectic" (which I will discuss below).

Further on in the *Science of Logic*, the negation of negation defines the notion of the concrete *infinite,* which takes the finite into itself. The same plot continues: the limit, by bordering the beyond, is now redefined through this "beyond," which reappears as its hidden ground, ceases to be a sheer negativity, and acquires a determination qua infinite. "Present in both [finite and infinite], therefore, is the same negation of negation. But this negation of negation is *in itself* self-reference, affirmation but as turning back to itself, that is, through the *mediation* that the negation of negation is" (Hegel 2010: 116). While Hegel consistently insists (like Sidney!) that two negations produce an affirmation, he thus denudes the primacy of negation over affirmation: the latter exists only by a (revolutionary) U-turn, not by a simple tautology. Also, "infinity" is here related to Aristotle's "infinite" (indeterminate, *aoristos*) name that a negation forms. The sheer positing of negativity (as a beyond-the-limit, for instance) is not a good alternative to dismissing it. One cannot keep the truth as a subjective thrust, with nothingness as a correlate. There is nothing in this nothingness, except for the determinable potentiality of the finite thing itself, but infinity is not an absolute Other. Hypertrophy of subjective negation, an emphasis on it, must be checked by the sober, objective understanding of its nothingness. (The hesitation between negativity's subjective and objective status points to the *imaginary* status of its correlates. This is what Hegel does not see clearly enough, although it had already been understood by Plato, was hinted at by Kant, and would be clearly formulated by Sartre)[1].

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[1] Plato's *khora*, a space of absolute alterity, produces *images* (*Timaeus* 51b–52c; Plato 1892, vol. 3: 44–45). Sartre (1993: 26) says that imagination "encloses in its very structure a nihilating thesis."

The negation of negation forcefully reappears at the end of the *Science of Logic*, where Hegel defines the "Concept," the pinnacle of his system. This concept is concrete and complex, it contains in itself the three—or, says Hegel, perhaps four—steps of negation: position, negation of this position, negation of this negation, and then the affirmative self-identity of the negation with itself. Hegel doubts whether the third and fourth element are the same.

> The *second* negative at which we have arrived, the negative of the negative, is this sublating of contradiction, and it too, just like contradiction, is not an *act of external reflection*; for it is on the contrary the *innermost*, *objective moment* of the life of spirit by virtue of which a *subject* is a *person*, is *free*. The negative appears as the *mediating* factor, because it holds itself and the immediate of which it is the negation within itself. In so far as these two determinations are taken as referring to each other externally in some relation or other, the negative is only the *formal* mediating factor; but, as absolute negativity, the negative moment of absolute mediation is the unity that is subjectivity and soul. [...] [T]he other of the other, the negative of the negative, is immediately *the positive, the identical, the universal*. In the whole course, if one at all cares to count, this second immediate is *third* to the first immediate and the mediated. But it is also third to the first or formal negative and to the absolute negativity or second negative; now in so far as that first negative is already the second term, the term counted as *third* can also be counted as *fourth*, and instead of a *triplicity*, the abstract form may also be taken to be a *quadruplicity*; in this way the negative or the difference is counted as a duality. The third or the fourth is in general the unity of the first and the second moment, of the immediate and the mediated. (Hegel 2010: 746)

This is quite significant, because it means that the negation of negation can be understood in a double way: as an affirmation, and as a reinforcement of negation, "absolute" negativity, pure negation. In fact, it is not easy to understand how this can be possible: negation by definition negates *something,* has a secondary status, and therefore cannot function in pure form. And if it refers to itself, it results in self-contradiction, which explains how it ultimately turns into affirmation. Hegel's hesitation is akin to his passage in the *Phenomenology*: "tarrying" with the negative is a paradoxical task, and is only possible as an unstable rhythmic or harmonic element, which is always halfway to or from a positivization.

In Hegel, the negation of negation is not only an affirmation but also a self-critique of negativity. Hegel repeatedly comments on the futility and powerlessness of sheer negation (for example, in the chapter on the French revolution, "Absolute Freedom and Terror" (1977: 355–363), where "unmediated pure negativity" turns into "the coldest and meanest of all

deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage," and is thus unable to transform the society). Thus, negation must be continued and repeated, which, paradoxically, means that it has to negate *itself,* to be a negation of negation, or the *absolute negation*. Negativity is recognized as such and attains a positivity of its own, creates a new objective world in which negativity is not obliterated but consciously maintained qua "Spirit." Here, as elsewhere, the negation of negation has an ambivalent meaning: either the negation is thereby finally annulled or it is reinstated on a new level. In fact, for Hegel, both happen simultaneously: the second, reflective negation, while remaining a negation, does not reject the object but creates a free space for it, and a free subject capable of accepting a universal in its objective exteriority. However, the risk of negation's auto-destruction and paralysis remains, and therefore its preservation figures, in Hegel, as an ethical task. In the most famous passage from the *Phenomenology*, he writes,

> But that an accident as such, detached from what circumscribes it, what is bound and is actual only in its context with others, should attain an existence of its own and a separate freedom—this is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of the pure 'I'. Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength. Lacking strength, Beauty hates the Understanding for asking of her what it cannot do. But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. (Hegel 1977: 19)

Hegel says here, on the one hand, that negativity (alias spirit) comes to the world not from outside, but from the very matter of abstract understanding and the "positive" facts it describes. The task is to discover and cherish the negativity inherent in this abstract picture, to study the objective world as a tragic world of pain and internal contradiction, and to patiently "work" to redeem it by setting free the force that holds it in tension. Note also the emphasis on the fragility and volatility of the negative: we tend to overlook it, not notice it, concentrating on what is being negated, and rejecting and forgetting it as a wrong move. The task of the speculative philosopher is to be attentive to the substance of negativity, to what filters the "wrong moves," to what constitutes enemies and denudes lies.

What Hegel does not really make clear is how constant self-negation can sustain itself, how we can "tarry" with the negative (as Hegel invites us to do), how it can keep foaming from the cup of infinity (as he states it does), and so forth. Because self-negation is self-contradiction, should it not cancel itself at the end of the day, after a period of melancholic self-destruction? Or could it definitively destroy the very thing that has been negated, ending the half-measures of *Aufhebung*? This is the one big question for the entire theory of twentieth century: Alexandre Kojève's and Herbert Marcuse's.

Kojève, the Russian-French philosopher usually seen as the initiator of the great twentieth-century French philosophical tradition, interpreted Hegel as a thinker of the end of history and emphasized the negative meaning of this "end": history does not freeze in the eternal *nunc stans* of *Aufhebung* (which was rather, I think, Hegel's own intention), but simply ceases after having accomplished its goal. The human subject is finite, and human history is finite; otherwise it would not make sense and would not entail negativity. But if this is true, then human history must end; its *telos* is its annulment. Therefore, says Kojève, today a satisfied human being returns to nature (which, pace Hegel, is not dialectical at all). Or, as Kojève corrected himself later, perhaps it returns, not merely to animality, but to the paradise of purely symbolic "snubbing" he thought he had found in Japan (1969: 161–162).

Kojève's ideas found a peculiar continuation in the work of George Bataille, another virtuoso of negative thinking. Already in the 1930s, in a letter to Kojève, Bataille suggested the concept of "unemployed negativity" (Bataille 1998: 297): he thus objected to Kojève's idea of the self-destruction of negativity by suggesting that negativity can subsist even in the state of accomplished positivity. Negativity does not die out but *remains without work*, without effect, and (as Bataille implies) it would even be more radical than the working negativity that is thus contaminated by the positive. Bataille is thus in agreement with his contemporaries Sartre and Lacan in his emphasis on the weakness and latency of negativity, which exists in excess of the positivity it powerlessly opposes.

On the contrary, Herbert Marcuse, in his excellent commentary to Hegel (1955), emphasizes the *destructive* aspect of his dialectic. The identity of a thing as we know it is in fact a result of external forces blocking its development: the dialectic helps us to uncover its internal tension, its internal potentialities, but to set them free, the thing has to be destroyed as such, in its current identity, as a result of internal contradiction. Only then it can pass into the new shape of existence that had been its hidden ground all along.

> For, what does the unity of identity and contradiction mean in the context of social forms and forces? In its ontological terms, it means that the state of negativity is not a distortion of a thing's true essence, but its

> very essence itself. In socio-historic terms, it means that as a rule, crisis and collapse are not accidents and external disturbances, but manifest the very nature of things and hence provide the basis on which the essence of the existing social system can be understood. It means, moreover, that the inherent potentialities of men and things cannot unfold in society except through the death of the social order in which they are first gleaned. When something turns into its opposite, Hegel says, when it contradicts itself, it expresses its essence. […] The Doctrine of Essence thus establishes the general laws of thought as laws of destruction: destruction for the sake of the truth. (Marcuse1955: 148–149)

The reaction of the Young Hegelians to Hegel, particularly that of Marx, had already yielded a similar interpretation. Their criticism aims at the *Aufhebung* and emphasizes its theoretical (objective) side: *Aufhebung* is not just activity of spirit but also a recognition of negation's failure. Marx therefore suggests moving from theoretical negation to physical destruction. The religious, ideological critique (in the case of a post-restoration Germany that is permeated by the cynical spirit and preserves a social order whose spirit had "passed away") is no longer efficient: it perpetuates its object. One has to negate this negation and destroy the very object that had made the liberal critique possible. The liberal preservation of past institutions that Hegel's *Aufhebung* conceives, should become the object of a second revolution.

> War upon the state of affairs in Germany! By all means! This state of affairs is beneath the level of history, beneath all criticism; nevertheless it remains an object of criticism just as the criminal who is beneath humanity remains an object of the executioner. […] It is not a lancet but a weapon. Its object is an enemy which it aims not to refute but to destroy. (Marx 1975a: 6)

This is a negation that no longer enjoys itself or coincides with the positive—it is purely negative. But that also means that it cannot nor should not last:

> Socialism is man's positive self-consciousness no longer mediated through the annulment of religion, just as real life is man's positive reality, no longer mediated through the annulment of private property, through communism. (Marx 1975b: 305)

"Socialism" is here a regime of new positivity as mediated through the negation of private property: communism serves here as a vanishing mediator and a negative magnitude, a regime of determinate negation.

Thus, on the one hand, if taken seriously, negation intends to destroy either itself or its object. But, on the other hand, it is de facto too "weak"

to do so: to perform, produce or even to signify such a destruction. How can we take a negativity seriously if it either ends up affirming, saying "yes" (as in Sidney), or keeps reinstating the negation, thus recognizing the failure of the previous one? The very joy of discovering "absolute negativity" is premature if this absolute negativity does not really negate anything but remains *merely* negative. In full accordance with Hegel's theory, most discouraging events and institutions we oppose have themselves been a result of negation; they incorporate negativity rather than propose or affirm genuinely universal principles. This is again obvious in post-revolutionary countries like Russia where the authoritarian regime continues to appeal to democracy and the rule of law, and does not claim any universal legitimacy apart from this hypocritical reference, and where egotistic behavior is justified by the loss of the mythical solidarity of Soviet times. But this is equally true of today's western societies, which use economic efficiency as a universal criterion, based on a disappointment in all absolute principles or goals except for the universal abstraction of free trade "democracy."[2] A "no" to these regimes is a negation of negation, the first negation being understood as theoretical or *objective* (nihilism, the understanding of nothingness), the second as practical or *subjective* (the rejection of nihilism). But it is a repetition of negation that risks reinforcing the nihilism of the status quo, as in the aforementioned example with corruption in Russia: "You see, they will respond to your 'no.' We cannot agree on anything here, so let us resort to the relativist and skeptical authority of capital." Thus, negation would remain "unemployed," but not as in Kojève, where it disappears or retreats in the face of a material historical synthesis: it is powerless against the miserable regime of abstraction and understanding.

Can we perform the negation of negation in a way that would not be tautological? Is there a way to ground and support our emancipatory and sovereign "no"?

Here is one more concrete example of double negation. As I have mentioned above, Jacques Lacan draws our attention to the redoubling of negation in French, the case of the so-called *ne explétif*: *je crains qu'il ne vienne* ("I fear he will come"). In English, a famous example would be *we don't need no education*. The use of the negative is illogical here, since in the first example, "fearing" already implies the subject's modal negation of the guest's arrival; in the second, *don't* already rejects the need for education. These are thus real-life cases of Hegelian negation. This structure is even more common in Russian, where the negative adverbs (never, nowhere, etc.) require a second negative particle before the verb: *ya nikogda otsiuda ne uedu* ("I will never leave this place"). But what does this ungrammatical struc-

[2] Noys (2010: 162) emphasizes the need for negative thinking by the inherence of negation in the real abstraction that forms our culture.

ture mean? According to Lacan, it *stages* a disjuncture between the negation that is part of the phrase's content or message, and the negation that is reflexive, addressed by the subject of speech to its own utterance: not only do I fear he will come, but this very statement evoking his arrival is what I reject. It is as though Sidney's coquette's "I will not, not sleep with you" meant a passionate albeit tortured refusal, not a surrender.

This is the split between what Émile Benvéniste calls *sujet d'énoncé* and *sujet d'énonciation*. It is this latter that, in Lacan's view, speaks for the "unconscious": the split of subjects in speech corresponds to the split of subjects in consciousness or psyche. (Freud, whom Lacan otherwise follows here, calls the content of the negated statement "unconscious," in the sense that it appears in a neutralized, suspended form. Thus, to Freud, as Jean Hyppolite rightly saw it (Lacan 1988: 289–298), the Hegelian *Aufhebung* produces the unconscious. Not so in Lacan, where it produces Spirit itself.)

For Lacan, the double negation thus proceeds from the weakness or failure of the first negative, which seems to leave untouched the negated thought, taking it too calmly in a way. The second negation shatters the very site of the utterance and meaning, at the same time demonstrating the instance of absolute negativity that the subject is. Not an *Aufhebung* or sublimation, but a certain *excess* of negativity is at play here. It is easy to see that Lacan interprets the double negation as an equivocation of an objectively and subjectively meant negation along the lines of what I have written above on this distinction. In Lacan's reading, the subject reacts to the inefficacy of the objective negation and repeats it, putting an emphasis on the enclitic particle that had originally been meant to be heard briefly, in passing, as a matter of course.

Thus, to summarize, a double or repeated negation can fail in *three* ways. It can simply annul itself and restore the previous affirmation. It can collapse into a tautological and powerless sheer negativity that does not really negate anything. Finally, it can become paralyzed by internal contradiction: saying no for the second (third, fourth, etc.) time means constantly refuting oneself. In this sense, negation, by trying to overcome its own futility, blocks itself. The task it thus really faces is to get to the point and attain a conclusive annulment of its object, while at the same time constituting a space of freedom (pure negativity) in its place. This task, however, remains infinite.

In fact, a negation hints at the possibility of destruction and erasure of what it denies (since it attributes falsity to the expression, and illegitimacy to the object). But it does not achieve it, since the very act of negation testifies to the existence of what it denies, both in expression and in reference. Hence the need to repeat the negation again, and hence the idea of radical negation as erasure: the negation that does not just reject but makes it as if the denied thing or situation had not existed in the first place. The negation of negation would in this context be a radicalization

of negation. In fact, before Hegel, some thinkers had noticed that the negation of negation did not necessarily restore the status quo. Thus, Aquinas (*Quaestiones de quodlibet* 10, q.1, a.1, ad 3; quoted in Hübener 1975: 124) qualifies the One as *negatio negationis et rei simul*, "negation of the negation and of the thing [that has been negated as well]." Unlike Hegel, Aquinas sees double negation as a radicalization of negation that seeks to overcome its internal contradiction of both negating and affirming its object.

Lacan (1992: 270–290) speaks in this respect of the "second death," a death that would be absolute. Paradoxically, the radicalness of this second negation, hardly achievable in practice, turns the negation rather on its theoretical side: pretending not to know anything about the subject is in a way more negative than to explicitly deny it. Freud's *Verneinung* is therefore a partial lifting of repression, not to mention what Lacan calls foreclosure (*Verwerfung*): the radical rejection of an experience "by default," without the need to actively deny it.

Here, as elsewhere, we encounter a *dissymmetry* between negation and affirmation. On the one hand, language implies the reversibility of these operations: either you affirm something or deny it. Affirmative and negative universal statements appear even to be *contrary* to each other (as in Aristotle), and thus symmetrically reversible as well. However, if we view them ontologically, as forms of the subject's symbolic activity in the world, we immediately see that the symmetry does not work. A negative statement (a negation of affirmation) quotes the positive and is thus a hybrid of negation and affirmation (the affirmation is here reinstated in a suspended, idealized way). A negation of negation does not annul it or return to the prior affirmation. The negation is, on the one hand, inefficient; on the other, it is excessive in relation to the affirmation it cannot annul. This has a fundamental socio-historical importance: the modern subject's negative effort against instances of domination and serfdom does not effectively cancel these instances but preserves them in an idealized/unconscious form (depending on one's perspective on the *Aufhebung*). At the same time, this effort, this destructive rage does not stop even after the physical destruction of the tyrant, but turns against the subject itself in the shape of revolutionary terror, the psychological and cultural melancholia of the modern subject, and the like. Andrei Platonov, the great Soviet Russian writer and scholar of revolutionary negativity, noted this effect early: "No revolutionary, but only a fool, reckons with reality. This is the same as kicking and feeling the pain from your own blows. Such a fighter would not remain standing for long: he would fall down from the imaginary pain of his own blows" (Platonov 2004: 189). The compassion of revolutionaries for their enemies is here the psychological analogy of the interiorization and reflexivization of negation, which had originally been a determinate denial of something unacceptable, implying a move to posit it as external, to push it outside.

Finally, Lacan's disjuncture of two subjects of two negations implies the *equivocation* of negation. If the negation of negation does not restore the affirmation, if a negation requires a second negation in another part of the sentence, then perhaps these negations are homonymous signs of different operations and/or states of things. This is the conclusion that Aristotle, with his love of analogy, reaches in his *Categories* and *On Interpretation.*

3. Equivocality and the Typology of Negation

Aristotle divides negation into four types: contrariness, contradiction, privation, and correlation. I will explain this typology below, but it must first be said that the main distinction separates the contradiction from the three other types of negation. It is one thing when we negate and imply that the contrary to the suggested hypothesis is true. Our negation then enters the heart of the matter: it helps to determine the truth, because contraries are intimately linked, belong to the same genus, and represent teleological motors moving in opposite directions. Even more instructive and objective is a *privative* negation. To invoke Sartre's example, Pierre is not at the café, but he should have been: negation points to the modality of the situation and its natural form. But *contradiction* is completely different. It refers to two mutually *indifferent* situations or things, or to the simple absence of a certain situation. Either it is raining or it is not; one and the same thing cannot be wholly red and wholly blue at the same time, etc. No active force is implied; no information about one member of a contradiction can be derived from the other.

Aristotle notes that the negation of something (as false, other, absent, etc.) is intimately linked with *opposition.* In the *Categories,* he lists linguistic contradiction (*antiphasis*) as one mode of expressing opposition (*ta antikeimena*). In *On Interpretation,* he focuses on negative expression (*apophasis*), with various oppositional forms as its aspects. It is within this context that his crucial classification of negation/opposition emerges.

Aristotle presents both opposition and negation as a relationship between *two* beings or two propositions: thus, in a way, he agrees with Plato on the idea of the "Other" as the support of all negativity. At the same time, he does not banish negation or opposition from philosophy but presents non-being (*me on*) as itself one of a being's modes (a "being" may mean a substance or, perhaps, a negation of substance): "[S]ome things are so called because they are a way into substance, or because they are destructions or deprivations or qualities of a substance […] or a negation either of a substance or of one of these latter (and hence we say even that that which is not is what is not)" (*Metaphysics* Γ 1003b10; Aristotle 1998: 81). Thus, negation's equivocality is itself part of the equivocality of being.

In the *Categories*, 10 (2012: 11b15–13b35), Aristotle specifies four different modes of this opposition: correlatives, contraries, privatives to positives, and "affirmation to negation." The latter relation is what he calls, in *On Interpretation* (2001: 17a35–18a12), a contradiction (*antiphasis*). Aristotle was the first to introduce this classification, which, with modifications, has survived into our times. In late antiquity, Apuleius formalized his teaching in the so-called logical square, which shows the relations of contrariness and contradiction between couples of affirmative and negative statements differing in quantity.

Correlatives (*ta pros ti*), writes Aristotle, are terms that form a couple, such as double and half, evil and good. Opposition appears here as symmetrical *inversion*. The introduction of this form allows Aristotle to view the world not as a set of fixed or fluid entities, but as a structure of relations capable of recombination.

Aristotle defines **contraries** (*ta enantia*) in several ways. In the *Categories,* they are defined as differences *within one genus*, although he adds, strangely, that they "can belong to contrary genera or be themselves genera," such as good and evil (*Categories* 14a 20; 2012: 27). In *On Interpretation* (2001: 20a15–30), the contrary relationship exists between a *universal* affirmation and negation ("all men are wise—no one is wise"). In the *Metaphysics* (1017a25; 1998: 129) Aristotle adds that they are the "most widely differentiated things" or "things between which the difference is greatest either simpliciter, or generically or formally." This definition does not seem very strict: there is no clear criterion for distinguishing a mere quantitative difference within a genus from contrariness. Aristotle's examples are black and white: they do not form a correlative couple like double and half. "The good is not spoken of as the good of the bad, but as the contrary of the bad, nor is white spoken of as the white of the black, but as the contrary of the black" (2012: 11b35-40). This is dubious: as we will see, Hegel in his *Logic* will insist precisely on the fact that the good *is,* or becomes, the good of the bad, and this is what makes the two contrary. The modern tradition obliterates Aristotle's *ta pros ti* relationship, but indeed it would make sense to see it, as Hegel implicitly did, as a way of strictly defining the contrary itself.

In Aristotle's system, the place of contraries, as opposed to contradictories, is central. It is the contraries that describe the genus-species relation that forms the two-tier *definition* of a thing. "Contrariety is a complete differentia" and "the differentia [in a species] is a contrariety" (*Metaphysics* 1058a15; 1998: 310). A species is defined teleologically as a full development of its difference from others. The genus remains in the background as the support of contrary *forces*: importantly, for Aristotle, contraries, unlike contradictories, are co-possible, inherent in one genus and one subject (*Metaphysics* 1009a35; 1998: 99).

The discovery of the contrary relationship, which must be thought together with the correlative relationship, adds a crucial turn to the theo-

ry of negativity. On the one hand, the contrary force and the *reversal* are the ways in which the merely ideal pure negation appears in the world. Aristotle notices this because he is interested in the temporal becoming of forms, the absolute alterity of *me on* being one of them. On the other hand, if we think in modern terms of a self-realizing subject, then reversals and contraries are ways of repeating and reinforcing a "simple" negation: because a simple "no" does not really do the job, and complete destruction is unthinkable, the force of negation expresses itself by *inverting* its object or using another object as the positive mark of its denial. This is the idea Freud would later develop. But let us continue our survey of Aristotle's classification.

Privation (*steresis*) is the situation in which "the faculty or possession in question is in no way present in that in which, and at the time at which, it should naturally be present" (Aristotle 2012: 12 a 30). The negative relation is in this case dependent on the implication of the naturally positive relation: the thing is absent from the place where it should have been. This is a case of clear *asymmetry*, where negation does not come from any substantial instance, but adds itself to an affirmation that alone remains substantial. The modern thinkers (from Kant to Heidegger) would go further, saying that privation is here a special negative form of possession itself.

The introduction of privation also helps Aristotle to ground his ontology of organic development: non-being exists as the blockage of natural development, in relation to *telos*. It is the perfection of *telos* that, paradoxically, explains non-being: not everyone is perfect. On the other hand, privation, as opposed to contrariness, is asymmetric. "There may be a change from possession to privation, but not from privation to possession. The man who has become blind does not regain his sight; the man who has become bald does not regain his hair; the man who has lost his teeth does not grow a new set," notes Aristotle (*Categories* 13a35; 2012: 25) in a melancholic vein.

The introduction of privation helps, by the way, to resolve the Parmenidean worry:

> There are two ways of negating. Either we can say that a thing does not obtain (*simpliciter*), or we can say that it does not pertain to a certain kind. The second way of negating involves the addition of the differentia to the single thing and not just the negating factor, since the negation of a thing in this way marks an absence. By contrast, in the case of privation, some underlying nature also arises, whose privation it is said to be. (*Metaphysics* 1004a15; Aristotle 1998: 82)

The same is true of the contraries, of course. In fact, writes Aristotle, contraries and privation/possession are tightly linked such that "one of the two contraries is always a privation" (*Metaphysics* 1004b25; 1998: 84, translation modified).

Finally, **contradiction** (*antiphasis*) is a relation between mutually incompatible states of affairs and statements about them. Here, negation finally comes into its own and is always identified as such. Aristotle shows that the contradiction of a universal judgment is always a particular, existential contradiction, and the statement about a possibility is contradicted by an *impossibility*. Contradiction is thus unproductive and not instructive.

Thus, Aristotle, agreeing with Plato that negation sends back to something different than X, finds this explanation to be insufficient. The negation discovers an active force of opposition in the reality itself. The Platonic alterity works for the case of contradiction, but not for the three other modes of "opposition," whether in being or speech. Correlation, contrariness, and privation are determinate negations, which are substantially associated with what they negate. They describe a negative (oppositional) element in reality itself. More specifically, they allow a logical formulation of the central concept of Aristotle's metaphysics: that of possibility and actuality. Thus, anticipating Kant and Hegel, Aristotle provides a means of thinking negativity as an active force and not as the encounter of indifferent positivities.

In the Middle Ages, the scholastics sharpened this Aristotelian classification by distinguishing between negations *inside* and *outside* the genus (the former are contraries and privations; the latter, contradictions). As we have seen above, Kant creatively continued the same tradition when he formulated his famous distinction between *nihil privativum* and *nihil negativum* (1992: 203–242).

By introducing "negative magnitudes" into philosophy or, more precisely, "world wisdom" (*Weltweisheit*), Kant reinterprets seemingly passive or inertial happenings as active forces. For Kant (unlike, later, Freud and Lacan) both "negative" and "positive" magnitudes are ontologically equivalent and per se positive. However, like Freud and Lacan after him, Kant points to the unconscious character of what negative magnitudes denote, at least when we speak of psychology. Subsequently, Kant makes the crucial observation that there is something obscure about negative psychological forces.

> I am now thinking, for example, of a tiger. This thought disappears, and in its stead the thought of a jackal occurs to me. It is, of course, true that, in the succession of representations, one cannot detect within oneself any special effort of the soul operating to cancel one of the representations mentioned above. But what an admirably busy activity is concealed within the depths of our minds which goes unnoticed even while it is being exercised. And it goes unnoticed because the actions in question are very numerous and because each of them is represented very obscurely. (Kant 1992: 228)

This is reminiscent of Kant's later qualification of the imagination, in the first Critique, as the hidden art of the soul; and indeed, Kant's exam-

ples concern the (negative) constitution of images. Kant further relates negative forces to the empirical understanding of the *unconscious,* as derived from Leibniz:

> If you ask a man of even the greatest learning at a moment when he is relaxing and at rest to recount something to you or share part of his knowledge of things with you, you will find that he knows nothing in this state, that he is empty and that he has no definite thoughts or judgments. But stimulate him by asking him a question or by expressing a view of your own, and his learning will reveal itself in a series of activities. […] Without any doubt, the real grounds of this occurrence had long been present in him, but since the consequence, as far as consciousness was concerned, was zero, those real grounds must have been opposed to each other. (Kant 1992: 236–237)

The big question we might pose to Kant here is whether negative magnitudes and positive entities are actually symmetrical and equally real. Kant seems to think so (he even adds, strangely, that the sum of all forces in the world equals zero). But the analogy with arithmetical negative magnitudes (which are fictional operators, after all) and the examples from the psychic unconscious seem to indicate the specificity of the negative elements, their role as mirror images or devil's advocates, anticipating the faculty that the mature Kant would call the "force of imagination" (*Einbildungskraft*).

Hegel picks up on Kant's ontologization of the negative when he makes "negativity" into a force—a fact of being, not of language. But he dialectically dissolves Kant's dichotomy by presenting *privativum* and *negativum* as *two different moments* of the work of the negative. For Hegel, *nihil negativum* is the primitive, abstract form of negation characteristic of the Understanding. But it is also the highest, self-reflexive form of negativity that abstracts itself from its object and understands itself as Spirit. In the middle, there is the necessary moment of *contrariness* in which a thing falls apart (Kant's *nihil privativum*).

However, Hegel has his own classification of the forms of negation, as presented in the second book of the *Science of Logic*, the "Doctrine of Essence." Here, Hegel speaks of subjective, reflective negation as an act of reason. He builds a sequence, identity — difference — opposition — contradiction, that only partly corresponds to Aristotle's typology of negatives. "Difference" is for Hegel (unlike Plato) also a form of negation, but an undeveloped one, whereas in opposition (or *contrariness*) the differences in one genus are reflected in one another and seen as inversions: the master is a master of a slave (the slave is implied), and the slave, a slave of the master (the master is implied in the slave), hence the symmetrical and symbiotic nature of their relationship (one cannot think here of Aristotle's *ta pros ti*, not only his *enantia*).

> Positedness is likeness and unlikeness; these two, reflected into themselves, constitute the determinations of opposition. Their immanent reflection consists in that each is within it the unity of likeness and unlikeness. Likeness is only in a reflection which compares according to the unlikeness and is therefore mediated by its other indifferent moment; similarly, unlikeness is only in the same reflective reference in which likeness is. — Each of these moments, in its determinateness, is therefore the whole. It is the whole because it also contains its other moment; but this, its other, is an indifferent existent; thus each contains a reference to its non-being, and it is reflection-into-itself, or the whole, only as essentially referring to its non-being. (Hegel 2010: 368)

Thus (against the interpretation of Deleuze, who, as we will see, accuses him of the Aristotelian hyperbolic understanding of negation as opposition), Hegel defines the contrary not as an extreme, maximal difference, but as a reflection of its other, so that the difference between the two terms becomes increasingly *internal*, and their essence, differential in itself. The contrariness is not between master and slave as maximally different from each other but between the master-slave and the slave-master. Thus, it is closer to Aristotle's correlative (rather than contrary) opposition.

It is this interiorization of the correlate term that causes relationship to collapse, since it collects the difference into one and the same genus or substance. The terms carry their non-being within themselves, which ends with the *contradiction,* that is, with the impossibility of their coexistence, and with the practical, real destruction of their relations, with a passage into the "ground," the logical foundation of the thing, which widens the horizon and places it in a universal context. The major remaining question is whether the "ground" appears as a result of destruction and crisis, which push the situation forward into the unknown, or whether this ground grows organically out of the very history of the thing's self-overcoming. How predictable and calculable is the movement of the Spirit? Hegel himself openly hesitates on this point and, at the end of the *Science of Logic*, he presents an alternative between the tripartite or quadripartite rhythm of the dialectic:

> [T]he other of the other, the negative of the negative, is immediately the positive, the identical, the universal. In the whole course, if one at all cares to count, this second immediate is third to the first immediate and the mediated. But it is also third to the first or formal negative and to the absolute negativity or second negative; now in so far as that first negative is already the second term, the term counted as third can also be counted as fourth, and instead of a triplicity, the abstract form may also be taken to be a quadruplicity; in this way the negative or the difference is counted as a duality. — The third or the fourth is in general the unity

> of the first and the second moment, of the immediate and the mediated. (Hegel 2010: 746)

Hegel continues the long tradition of distinguishing between equivocal senses of negativity: one is here a determinate *privation* that depends on what it denies; another, the *nihil negativum*, which in Hegel (unlike Kant) becomes a force of its own and occupies the place of the subject and source of negativity. Being purely negative, however, it cannot really occupy this place. The whole question is whether the *absolute* negativity, the negative of the negative, has an autonomous consistence of its own, or if it immediately collapses into the reaffirmation, by way of self-cancellation, of two negations. In the former case, the dialectic takes a revolutionary form and moves forward with its destructive side.

Finally, we must mention in the same list of classifications Freud's different types of *subjective* negations that produce various forms of the unconscious. Freud himself does not make this classification explicit, but in his later reconstruction (on repression, denegation, and foreclosure, see Lacan, 1997: 64–65; on fetishism, see Lacan, 1994), Lacan specified at least four modes of negation: negation (*Verneinung*), disavowal (*Verleugnung*), repression (*Verdrängung*), and foreclosure (*Verwerfung*), each of which is only incompletely negative. They do not destroy the denied thing or phenomenon, or entirely erase it, so it "returns" in one way or another.

Verdrängung, the most generic form, is the expulsion of a representation from consciousness. It is not erased completely, however, and the very activity of negation testifies to the persistence of the repressed thought. It is in this sense that Freud notes, paradoxically, that repression coincides with the return of the repressed.

Verneinung, as I have mentioned above, is a spoken, explicit negation, which thereby needs to mention the very content it denies. Thus, argues Freud, it is the partial lifting of repression. Jean Hyppolite even suggests (Lacan 1988: 289–298) that it has to do with the Hegelian *Aufhebung* and with the Freudian "sublimation" of the unconscious.

Verleugnung, disavowal, is, as I have also discussed above, the type of negation characteristic of fetishistic perversion. In this case, no negative expression is used. Instead, a positive *object* (and a ritual dedicated to it) serves as a border between two worlds: one in which, says Freud, the Mother is not castrated; and another where she is. The two worlds peacefully coexist, thus violating the law of the excluded middle.

Finally, *Verwerfung*, foreclosure, a term not conceptualized by Freud and which he used only once, in his analysis of the Wolf Man (Freud 1974: XVII, 84)*,* served Lacan later on when he developed his theory of psychosis. In *Verwerfung*, a thought or "signifier" means that it is not actively repressed, but belongs to a gray zone of indifference that had originally not been accepted within the subject. In normal cases, this is a matrix for the constitution of "external" reality, and for further active expulsion. Some-

times, however, phenomena of vital importance to the subject fall into the same zone, thus constituting an alien splinter within its psychic life.

Freud writes of the foreclosure of castration that "it was as if it [castration] did not exist," which gives Lacan reason to translate *Verwerfung* as *forclusion*, a word used by the French grammarians Damourette and Pichon for the redoubled negation in French (*ne … rien*). As we have discussed above, this reduplication serves to reinforce negation. Moreover, it tries to subsume the subjective negation under the objective one, and make the denied content appear as nonexistent, denying not only it but the first subjective negation as well (no need to negate it, no reason to ask the question in the first place). This need goes back, for Lacan, to what was not fully expelled originally, but is dismissed and neglected by the subject (such as Polynices' body by Kreon in Sophocles' *Antigone*) and therefore winds up in the space "between two deaths" (Lacan 1997: 270–283).

All of these negations are somehow incomplete, and we could add that the fifth case—an object's physical disappearance—is not a complete negation either, as the case of melancholia, with its indefinite unconscious mourning for a lost object, clearly demonstrates. The basis of this classification is unclear. The four negations differ in force, as well as in the way the negated content is posited for the subject (which it is in the first three cases). In *Verdrängung* and *Verneinung*, negation is *subjective*: it is expressed by a negative particle or by a fetish, or it shows itself as the work of repression. In the case of *Verwerfung,* negation is objective (theoretical): we do not deny something, but rather perceive it as absent. The case of *Verleugnung* is mixed, because the split is marked by a fetish. The subjective negation is thus expressed objectively, projected onto an object.

In various shapes, the equivocation of negativity and the dialectic of negativity are of primary importance for our socio-historical tasks. First, the modern subject does not emancipate itself merely by denying the past and reaching into the unknown. In the process of expelling past forms, it produces their *inversions* (sovereign people rule instead of sovereign monarchs; man, not God, is the center of universe, and other such "Copernican" revolutions). More broadly, contemporary democracy implies a spirit of contesting all powers-that-be on the part of a subordinate but emancipated subject. Science and technology are involved in a battle against the determinate laws and insistent presence of nature that is fought with nature's own arms. The restlessness of negativity must be maintained on some level, as Hegel rightly put it. But the risk is that the site of negativity will become a site of aversion, and absolute negation turn self-destructive*: nihil privativum* can logically lead to *nihil negativum*, to an abandonment of the world and disappointment in the universal. In his analysis of the French Revolution (quoted above), Hegel himself saw this danger, and the later German tradition (for example, Nietzsche and Heidegger, among many others) elaborated the concept of "nihilism" as the negation of the very "nothing" that must have ideally been the spring

of historical progress. Kojève expressed the same idea in opposite terms when he suggested that history would end with self-annulment and bring forth a new idle state of nature.

This is *the* problem of negativity.

Let me recapitulate its main aspects:

- the ambivalence of double negation
- the asymmetry between negation and affirmation
- the latency and weakness of negation with regard to affirmation
- the respective need for its repetition and reinforcement
- the equivocation amongst contrariness, privation, and contradiction.

II. Negativity Today

1. Negativity Pro et Contra

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concept of negativity, so important for the modern subject's self-understanding and the core of the influential Hegelian-Marxist tradition, was attacked. Originally, this was an attack on the part of Bergson that organically fit with the positivist critique of ontologizing negation. But in the latter half of the twentieth century, Bergson's criticism was renewed and continued by Deleuze and, in another lineage, supported by Derrida. Both cases were an attempt to break with "teleological" Hegelianism.

In *Creative Evolution* (1922), Bergson reprints his article from the *Revue Philosophique* (1890) dedicated to the concepts of nothing and negation. He rejects the intellectual significance of negation, thus reinforcing his own picture of a continuous world without breaks. But he also outfits it with a theory, which influenced subsequent French thought, both the school that would build on negativity, and the one that would repel it. Bergson insists that negation and position are asymmetrical. Negation is secondary: it is a reflection upon negation. It is infinite or indeterminate. (Bergson thus reduces all negation to the logic that Aristotle attributed to a negative *name*, not a judgment.)

> If now we analyze this idea of Nothing, we find that it is, at bottom, the idea of Everything, together with a movement of the mind that keeps jumping from one thing to another, refuses to stand still, and concentrates all its attention on this refusal by never determining its actual position except by relation to that which it has just left. (Bergson 1922: 305)

Furthermore, negation does not correspond to any state of affairs. It is of a "social and pedagogic nature" (Bergson 1922: 304); that is, "not" is

a rhetorical or expressive operator, addressed to another person, not a thing. Finally, negation and nothing appear only in a mind endowed with memory: they imply a human temporality that makes breaks.

> To represent that a thing has disappeared, it is not enough to perceive a contrast between the past and the present; it is necessary besides to turn our back on the present, to dwell on the past, and to think the contrast of the past with the present in terms of the past only, without letting the present appear in it. (Bergson 1922: 300)

As the 1960s dawned, we see in the post-Kojèvian French tradition a turn to what Benjamin Noys calls "affirmationism." "Difference" is preferred to negation and contradiction; "force," to subjectivity; creation and production, to destruction. The general context of this turn is, as Noys rightly says (2010: 2), the search for a compromise between the critical spirit and the surviving capitalism that had appropriated some of that spirit. But it is equally an anarchist and irrationalist reaction against both Marxism and Hegelianism as the grand ideologies that were addressed to the subject, individual or collective (the party). A (certain) Platonic notion of "otherness" and the *khora* was operated here to justify the spirit of a subjective alibi by a strategic maneuver, plus the utopia of a depersonified, non-anthropomorphic world, rather than an existential or political *position* of any sort.

We should recall Derrida and Deleuze's positions here. Particularly in his essay on Bataille (1978), Derrida rejects the notion of negativity because it is a logical concept that implies the coherence of thought and the meaningfulness of verbal propositions. "Negativity" does not destroy sense itself and is thus not radical enough to do what it promises. Note that Derrida is quite sympathetic to what it does promise, in Bataille as in others. He just attempts to resolve the problem by other means, which include poetic nonsense and comic reductio ad absurdum.

For his part, Deleuze does not oppose philosophical discourse as such. Like Derrida, he tries to preserve the non-identical and singular under the title of "difference," which he opposes (!) to negation. Deleuze refers to Plato and relies on the *Sophist*, where negativity is explained through "alterity." His apology of difference is preceded by a rich and learned critique of Aristotle and Hegel, both of whom introduce the notion of difference only to subordinate it to the hyperbolic category of contrary opposition.

True difference, argues Deleuze, is internal (a thing distinguishes itself from what does not distinguish itself from it), infinite, and minimal. It is based on the infinitely small, as opposed to the hyperbolic nature of the logical *opposition*. Difference *adds* something to a notion, rather than subtracting anything from it; it *individuates* rather than abstracts. Being itself is difference.

The semblance of the dialectic that persists in all of Deleuze's texts (for instance, the "Copernican revolution," which inverts the relationship of identity and difference, and makes the former orbit the latter; Deleuze 1994: 40) is explained by him in the sense that a negative effect can in fact be produced by affirmation itself: a decisive affirmation can destroy. "The negative [...] is the effect of an affirmation that is too strong or too different" (Deleuze 1994: 54). Likewise, "the non-being is not the being of the negative, but rather, it is the being of the problematic, the being of problem and question" (Deleuze 1994: 64). Deleuze argues against Sartre, who explained the question via negativity. He relies on Heidegger, for whom, he thinks, the question is a site of difference, not of negation (Deleuze 1994: 64).

We recognize Bergson's motifs here, but also some ideas of the theorists of negativity, turned back against them. Indeed, the philosophy of difference, like the philosophy of negativity, emphasizes the *relational* essence of beings. Deleuze's insistence on the weak and minimal character of difference reminds us of the latency and superficiality that Sartre attributed to negation. (Negativity in Sartre has nothing to do with the dramatic emphasis on the contraries for which Deleuze reproaches Aristotle and Hegel.) The ontology of the "question" comes from Heidegger, who derived it from "the nothing" or cancelled "Being": it is not a negative entity in Hegel's sense, but an ontological void in the spirit of Democritus or Plato. Deleuze's idea of negation as secondary to affirmation continues the logic of Kant's "negative magnitudes": what seems to us a "nothing" is in fact an active force, argue both Kant and Nietzsche (whom Deleuze, for this reason, wrongly enlists into the "affirmationists"). In a way, Deleuze gives us an interesting theory of negativity, even though he calls it something else. Its main problem, however, is the new affirmative difference's lack of a return effect on what had preceded it. Without the *reflection* inherent in opposition, one is unable to move anything *backwards* or forward. Adored by Bergson and Deleuze, motion appears as sheer distribution or disjunction, without the possibility of backward and forward effects, because these are achieved precisely through negation.

In response to this criticism of negative ontologies, it must be answered that:

1. Negativity is not a mere hypostasis of lack, pain or passivity. Negation, logically and linguistically, is what comes *after* an affirmation. But this secondary status does not deprive it of its irreducible ontological position. A philosophy of negativity is superior to sheer "affirmationism" because it presupposes an overabundance of being, which it denies by carving out a free space for the subject. In particular, this is the meaning of Nietzsche's thesis on the primacy of forgetting, as well as the primacy of expenditure in the "general economy" for Bataille. These two thinkers are wrongly enlisted as allies by the affirmationists as led by Deleuze.

2. Negativity is even less a mere diagnosis of crisis. Along with some others, Badiou holds negativity primarily responsible for the present-day

political culture, which privileges victimhood and suffering over agency. The Frankfurt School's "negative dialectic" is often read as a sheer insistence on gaps, dissonance, and incoherence, instead of an inquiry into the new motive forces of the present. This criticism is (superficially) valid with respect to certain moments in Benjamin and Adorno, but in fact both thinkers used their negative dialectic to free access to the active potentiality of subjects (Benjamin) and the material substantiality of objects (Adorno). Genuine negative philosophy is not just about gaps and disjunctures (*nihil negativum*). It is equally about the negative magnitudes of *imagination*, which uncovers the hidden, obverse side of the status quo's dogmatic appearance.

2. The Actuality of the Negative

Negativity is a concept highly useful for interpreting the contemporary world.

1. It allows us to capture the ambiguity of apathy and the sterile fruitlessness of effort and revolutionary energy, which are based on the real *openness* of action and passion. The two stem from a denial of the transcendent absolute, which, however, remains negatively implied[3]. The ambiguity between them derives from the ambivalence between the objective (theoretical) and subjective (practical) meanings of negation. And the use of the negative operator allows us to discern an active, practical core under an apparent lack and inertia.

[3] In his recent book (2011), Benjamin Noys criticizes the "affirmationism" of contemporary French philosophy and suggests the need for a return to negativity. He suggests four main factors giving rise to this need. First, we must analyze and oppose the "real abstraction" of capital, which is in itself negative: negation is "the means to contest the universalizing power of the abstract from within" (166). Second, there is the role of negation in fostering *agency*. Third, there is the negative essence of *masochism* as a strategy of suspension and subversion, as opposed to direct transgression; Noys illustrates this third usage with a quotation from Walter Benjamin's essay on Edward Fuchs (3). Fourth, there is the need to conceive *destruction*, not just creation. As is quite clear from this list itself, we need negation not only for pragmatic but also for theoretical purposes, as a tool for recognizing the dialectical *transformations* that one and the same subjective position can undergo. The most important of the dialectical oppositions the concept of negation can address, is the opposition between agency and apathy, activity and passivity, both of which are expressed through negative statements and attitudes with regard to the world and being. Implicitly, this is evident from Noys's mention of the *masochist* strategy (163–165; see also his article in the present volume), which is precisely the attempt to remain active in the very gesture of radical passivity.

2. It helps us to describe theoretically the late-modern historical situation, where old institutions of domination, religions, and ethnic borders continue to exist even if they have been symbolically discredited. There is a sense of historical exhaustion that, nevertheless, does not lead to transcendence but leaves the subject constantly at a threshold. What we see behind us are ruins, as Walter Benjamin famously stated in "On the Concept of History" (2003: 389–400), and Joseph Brodsky after him[4]. I would add: the ruins of *everything*. The negation of negation translates into the failed promise of negativity. The frustrated will of the narcissistic, sovereign subject leads, practically, to the world's *derealization* and its transformation into a mere image. There is, on the one hand, the lack of a clearly determined *outside*, because science and media concentrate all being within one's reach; on the other, there is the sense of the subject's right and duty to negate. As a result, we have Sartrean *mauvaise foi*, a cynical subject of ideology trapped in its own subjectivity. An ironic distance from what one does and says permits one to live a quiet, conformist life without noticing it.

3. Because, in an environment of negated self-identical objects, there is a *positivist* ideology that presents dominant interpretations of phenomena as "ironclad facts" beyond their universal horizon, their history, and their potential for transformation. Positivism reduces all social processes to relationships among individuals, meaning either relationships among elites or statistical majorities. Any alternative to positivism has to swallow the antidote of *negativism*. The liberal-democratic insistence on openness and difference (semiotic and hermeneutic) is a way of maintaining the negativity of modernity in consciousness and action.

4. Because this liberal-democratic spirit of critique is insufficient so long as it is predetermined by its opponent. An institution of negativity depends on the coexisting positivity untouched by it, and freedom turns into the autonomous humanist "public sphere." A second degree of negativity is needed to transform both the oppressive institutions and the liberal subjectivity that depends on them.

5. Because, as a consequence of this condition, we can catch a utopian glimpse of an impossible condition—of negativity as such, pure or "absolute" negativity, as Hegel used to call it. This negativity would not be a mere nothingness (in fact, nothing is a contradictory notion, since it would, as a thinkable entity, be *something*), but rather an infinite horizon that would a) provide conditions for constant *Bildung* qua self-overcoming; b) build up a sociability based on the mimetic mutual sharing of iden-

[4] "Here we've spent—I swear it—more than half our lifetimes. / As a slave—now white-haired—told me near the tavern: / 'When we look around us, all we see is ruins.' / A barbarian perspective, though a true one." Joseph Brodsky, "Letters to a Roman Friend," VI (Brodsky 2000: 59).

tities and a communist, fraternal relationship to the Other as foreground rather than figure (in opposition to the hypostatization of the Other in bourgeois anti-utopian philosophy).

Conclusion

Our time is objectively defined by an enormous *excess* of presence and appearance. The abundance of consumer goods, the bombardment by media images, the obsessive archiving of the past: all these things seem to leave no space for negativity. Deleuze and his disciples seem to be right about this. They are also right that contemporary history's violence and negativity is the violence of hyperreality and intrusive affirmation. Yes, this negativity is a function of affirmation. But that is the entire problem: negativity as such remains unaccounted for, "unemployed," to echo Bataille.

On the subjective side, we live in an age of curiosity and pacification: learning to be polite and tolerate the Other (at a distance, of course) generates expectations of eternal peace and a military policy aimed at pacification. Negativity writ large is not welcome: when advocated too frankly, as in Hegel or Schmitt, it provokes accusations of militarism by the likes of the *nouveaux philosophes*. The exceptional attention to negation in the recent work of Paolo Virno is symptomatic in that it emphasizes its anthropological role: to protect the subject from empathy with others. Virno rightly calls negation a "catechon", even though he does not see its unique historical role in our sentimental mediatic society but prefers a general anthropological diagnosis. (Virno 2008, 189). What the naturalization of "empathy" in the mirror neurons does not allow Virno to see, is the negative thrust that is required on the part of the Other (usually a mediatic Other) to actively provoke compassion. Em-*pathy* has to do with negative, suffering-based conditions.

The argument of this paper is that in this age of affirmation, negativity is the order of the day: the subject needs to carve out for itself an empty space, which is not a given. Moreover, the very reality of things vanishes, not so much because we have lost the intuition of being (pace Heidegger, even though he defined being as nothingness), but because we have lost the capacity for positing the outside. Both Hegel and Freud thought that *reality* depends not only on being but also on the negative act of expelling it from the ego. Distancing and the fetishist disavowal of presence are not sufficient for such a positing: an otherness and othering is required that would at the same time not equal nothingness and destruction. Hence the rather sad variations of Bataille (nostalgic) and Derrida (melancholic) on the difficulties of *giving*. On the other hand, the images that assault us, if conceived as overflowing simulacra and virtualities, risk becoming fetishes if they are not recognized in their negative

nature: pictures of suffering and catastrophe, which have always been a human pastime, must function as unstable fulcra for action. Their perception and interpretation as facts, or as the violent effects of positive energies, may produce melancholic fixations.

Freud and Benjamin diagnose the melancholic mood of the contemporary west, not because they are outdated modernists or hysterical neurotics, but because melancholia (or depression) *is* the affect of a time that has lost not just its Other (whether God, a father figure or the hope for extraterrestrials), but the capacity for othering, expelling, forgetting. Julia Kristeva's interpretation of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" is correct: melancholia is not just about repressed love, but about the impossibility of hating anything, or at least parting with anything. As she argues, the melancholic is incapable of negation—or, we might add, the melancholic cannot negate the negation, cannot witness the very fact of dismissal.

What theoretical response might we make to this?

First, there is Nietzsche and Freud's intuition that there are moments when affirmation and negation are *one*. Both signify the infantile cruelty of the child, or the triumphalist aggressiveness of the macho. But the same logic must be extrapolated to negativity as *relation*: affirmation and negation unite in an act of positing an outside thing and letting it be, even if it has affected you "first." This, I believe, is the true sense of Hegel's determinate reflection and Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*. In order to save the project of Enlightenment from disastrous suffocation, we should not just emancipate ourselves but also emancipate things from ourselves. Not via some sort of naturalism, but by becoming virtuosos of negativity who partake in the violence of the world.

Second, what we should learn is to practice negativity and *own* it. In a world of ubiquitous, violent attacks on the ego, what we lack is our *own* negation. Sartre's impersonal consciousness-nothingness is insufficient here as long as it contains no remedy against depersonalization, which he describes in a fatalist way as "nausea." The *nihil negativum* of consciousness must be grounded in the *nihil privativum* of the *unconscious*, in the sense of the inner Styx we protect from the light of the day but treat as a receptacle of images: fulcra, signals, ciphers—not fetishes.

Politically, what this means is that there is a latent force of negativity in apathetic bourgeois consciousness. Revolutions end up in collective melancholia because they remove from power the placeholders of the universal, but cannot quite remove the state and sovereignty itself, thus leaving the populace burdened with unrealized, objectless, and unconscious negativity (Magun 2009). Negation either remains objective (the expulsion of bad rulers and the return to normalcy, with *taedium vitae* as a bonus) or, on the contrary, turns hyperbolically subjective and is sublimated as a reaction to the void of sovereignty in such a way that revolution becomes the sacred name of an event. This scenario ends in the empty, futile destruction of terror.

The collective subject disavows the universal, because it rejects its present form. In the revolutions that regularly occur, this discontent becomes the very form of modern democratic and antitheist universality. The same revolutionary form creates a utopian imaginary and invents new forms of inversions, mirror-images, literal over-affirmations, regular laws, and power relations: these are the necessary forms in which negativity appears and proceeds, but they are unfortunately fleeting, as, for instance, the revolutionary councils and communal experiments. In recent years, however, revolutions have become almost a routine of history and immanent forms of contestation within the liberal-democratic state. This domestication is perhaps something to welcome and use, because in a perverted sense it testifies to the Hegelian logic of negativity. Perhaps revolution should be incorporated into the state. The constituent power should become, paradoxically, a product of the constituted power. A democratic state on the top of itself must regularly dissolve itself in a form stronger than elections. The people's sovereignty, Rousseau's oxymoron, should be understood as such: the disorganized multitude should be allowed to rule by the One that they presuppose; the ruling party or leader can create self-governance committees they would almost be unable to control. This is a dangerous mode, and usually the rulers who employ it do not stay in power long (from Louis XVI to Gorbachev), or they turn self-governance into terrorist cleansing (Stalin and Mao). However, these examples testify to the need for thinking in this direction. Democracy taken seriously is the sacred alliance of the sovereign with the demon of its demos.

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