

# Why Should a Dialectician Learn to Count to Four?

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## *The triad and its excess*

How far must a Hegelian dialectician learn to count? Most of the interpreters of Hegel, not to mention his critics, are trying to convince us in unison that the right answer reads: to three (the dialectical triad, etc.). Moreover, they compete with each other as to who will call our attention more convincingly to the 'fourth side', the non-dialecticizable excess, the place of death (of the dummy – in French, *le mort* – in bridge), supposedly eluding the dialectical grasp, although (or, more precisely, in so far as) it is the inherent condition of possibility of the dialectical movement: the negativity of a pure expenditure that cannot be sublated (*aufgehoben*), re-collected, in its Result. Unfortunately, as is the custom with the criticism of Hegel, the trouble with Hegel is here the same as the trouble with Harry in Alfred Hitchcock's film: he doesn't consent to his burial so easily. On a closer look it soon becomes obvious that the supposedly unannihilating reproach drawn by the critics from their hats actually forms the crucial aspect of the very dialectical movement. That is to say, a careful reader will immediately recall not only numerous cases like the four types of judgement from the first part of the 'subjective logic', but also the fact that Hegel thematises a quadruplicity proper to the dialectical movement as such, i.e., the excess of the pure nothingness of self-relating negativity which vanishes, becomes invisible, in the final Result. In the last chapter of his *Logic*, apropos of the elementary matrix of the dialectical process, Hegel points out that the moments of this process could be counted as three or as four, with the subject as the surplus-moment which 'counts for nothing':

In this turning point of the method, the course of cognition at the same time returns into itself. As self-sublating contradiction this negativity is the *restoration* of the *first immediacy*, of simple universality; for the other of the other, the negative of the negative, is immediately the *positive*, the *identical*, the *universal*. If one insists on *counting*, this *second* immediate is, in the course of the method as a whole, the *third* term to the first immediate and the mediated. It is also, however, the third term to the first or formal negative and to absolute negativity or the second negative; new as the first negative is already the second term, the term reckoned as *third* can also be reckoned as *fourth*, and instead of a *triplicity*, the abstract form may be taken as a *quadruplicity*; in this way, the negative or the difference is counted as a *duality*.<sup>1</sup>

The first moment is the immediate positivity of the starting point. The second moment, its mediation, is not simply its immediate contrary, its external opposite – it comes forth precisely

when we endeavour to grasp the first moment, the immediate *in and for itself, as such*. In this way, we already mediatise it and, imperceptibly, it turns into its own opposite. The second moment is thus not the negative of the first, its otherness. It is the first moment itself as *its own other*, as the negative of itself: as soon as we conceive the abstract-immediate starting point (as soon as we determine the concrete network of its presuppositions and implications, explicate its content), it changes into its own opposite. Already, on the most abstract level, 'nothingness' is not the external opposite of 'being': we arrive at 'nothingness' by simply trying to specify, to determine the content of the notion of 'being'. Herein consists the fundamental dialectical idea of 'inner negativity': an entity is negated, passes over into its opposite, as a result of the development of its own potential. Fascism, to take a worn-out example, is not an external opposite to liberal democracy but has its roots in the liberal democracy's own inner antagonisms. This is the reason why negativity must be counted twice: to negate the starting point effectively, we must negate its own 'inner negation' in which its content comes to its 'truth' (fascism, although opposed to liberal capitalism, is not its effective negation but only its 'inner' negation: to negate liberal capitalism effectively, we must therefore negate its very negation). This second, self-relating negation, this (as Hegel would put it) otherness reflected into itself, is the vanishing point of absolute negativity, of 'pure difference' – the paradoxical moment which is *third* since it is already the *first* moment which 'passes over' into its own *other*. What we have here could also be conceptualised as a case of retroactive determination: when opposed to its radical Negative, the first moment itself changes retroactively into its opposite. Capitalism-in-itself is not the same as capitalism-as-opposed-to-communism. When confronted with the tendencies of its dissolution, capitalism is forced to negate itself 'from within' (to pass into fascism) if it is to survive. This dialectics was articulated by Adorno apropos of the history of music:

The means and forms of musical composition discovered later concern and change the traditional means and above all the forms of interdependence that they constitute. Every tritone used today by a composer already sounds as the negation of the dissonances liberated in the meantime. It doesn't possess anymore its former immediacy ..., but is something historically mediated. Therein consists its own opposition. When this opposition, this negation, is passed over in silence, every tritone of this kind, every traditionalist move, becomes an affirmative, convulsively confirming lie, equal to the talking about happy world customary in the other domains of culture. There is no primordial sense to be re-established in music...<sup>2</sup>

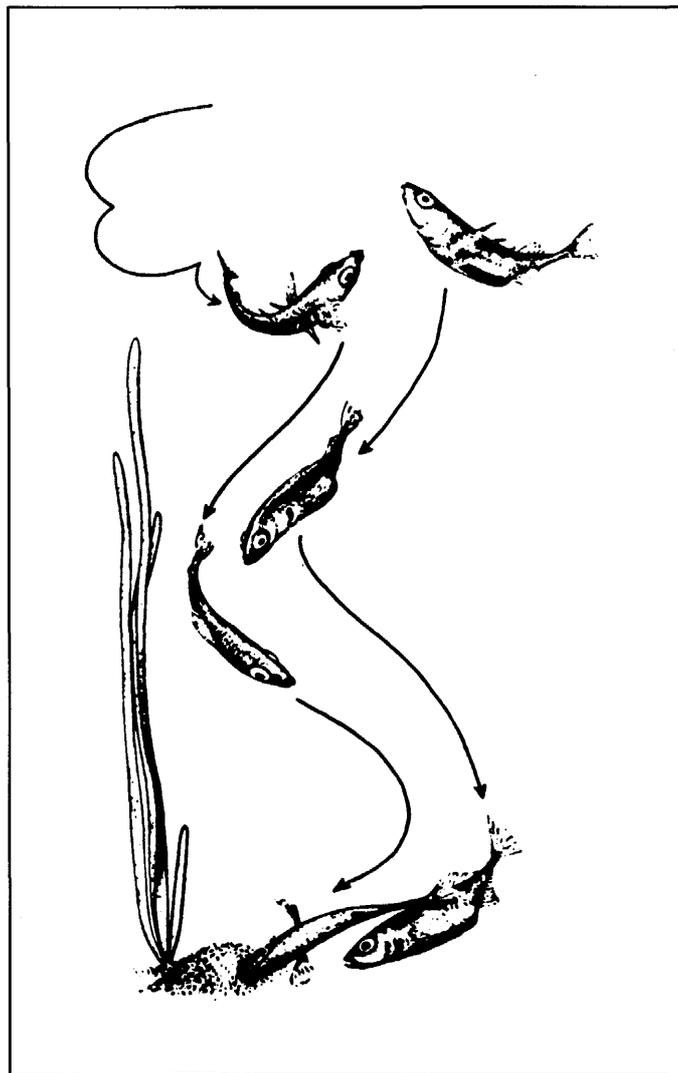
Here we have an exemplary case of what structuralism calls 'determination-by-absence'. After the advent of dissonances, the meaning of the tritone changes since its further use implies the negation of dissonances – its new meaning results from the way the very *absence* of dissonances is *present* in the use of the tritone. In its immediate presence, tritone remains the same: its historical mediation is revealed by the fact that *it changes precisely in so far as it remains the same*<sup>3</sup> Herein consists also the falsity of today's calls for a return to traditional values. In so far as we re-establish them, they are not the same any more, since they legitimise the social order which is their very opposite.<sup>4</sup> We can now see how the supplementary element emerges: as soon as we add to the immediate its negation, this negation retroactively changes the meaning of immediacy, so we must count to three, although what we effectively have are just two elements. Or, if we envisage the complete cycle of the dialectical process, there are just three 'positive' moments to count over (the immediacy, its mediation and the final return to the mediated immediacy). What we lose is the unfathomable surplus of the pure difference which 'counts for nothing' although it makes the entire process go, this 'void of the substance' which is at the same time the 'receptacle (*Rezeptakulum*) for all and everything', as Hegel put it.

### Protestantism, Jacobinism ...

Such ruminations are however of a purely formal nature, in the best tradition of the exasperating abstract reflections on 'dialectical method'. What they lack is the inner relatedness to a concrete historical content. As soon as we move to this level, the idea of a fourth, surplus moment *qua* 'vanishing mediator' between the second moment (the split, the abstract opposition) and the final Result (reconciliation) immediately acquires concrete contours. One has to think only of the way Fredric Jameson, in his essay on Max Weber,<sup>5</sup> articulates the notion of 'vanishing mediator' apropos of Weber's theory of the role of Protestantism in the rise of capitalism. This theory is usually read as (and was also meant by Weber himself to be) a criticism of the Marxist thesis of the primacy of economic infrastructure. Ultimately, Weber's point is that Protestantism was a condition of capitalism. Jameson, on the contrary, interprets Weber's theory as fully compatible with Marxism as the elaboration of the dialectical necessity by means of which, in the passage of feudalism into capitalism, the 'normal' relationship of 'base' and 'superstructure' is inverted.

Wherein, *precisely*, consists this dialectical necessity? In other words: how, *specifically*, does Protestantism create conditions for the emergence of capitalism? Not, as one would expect, by limiting the reach of religious ideology, by undermining its all-pervasive presence characteristic of medieval society, but on the contrary by *universalising* its relevance. Luther was opposed to cloisters and Church as institutions apart, separated by a gap from the rest of society, because he wanted the Christian attitude to penetrate and determine our entire secular everyday life. Contrary to the traditional (pre-Protestant) stance which basically limits the relevance of religion to the aims towards which we must tend, while leaving the means – the domain of secular economic activity – to the non-religious common judgement, the Protestant 'work ethic' conceives the very secular activity (economic acquisitiveness) as the domain of the disclosure of God's grace. This shift can be exemplified by the changed place of asceticism. In the traditional Catholic universe, asceticism concerns a stratum of people separated from everyday secular life, devoted to representing in this world its Beyond, i.e. the Heaven on Earth (saints, monks with their abstinence), whereas Protestantism requires every Christian to act ascetically in his or her secular life, to

accumulate wealth instead of spending it thoughtlessly, to live in temperance and modesty: in short, to accomplish his or her instrumental-economic activity 'with God in mind'; asceticism as the affair of a stratum apart thereby becomes superfluous. This universalisation of the Christian stance, the affirmation of its relevance for secular economic activity, generates the attributes of the 'Protestant work ethic' (compulsive work and accumulation of wealth, i.e. renunciation to compulsion, as an end-in-itself). Simultaneously, yet unknowingly and unintentionally, following the 'cunning of Reason', it opens the way to the devaluation of religion, to its confinement to the intimacy of a private sphere separated from state and public affairs. The Protestant universalisation of the Christian stance is thus merely a transitory stage in the passage to the 'normal' state of the bourgeois society where religion is reduced to 'means', i.e. to a



medium enabling the subject to find new strength and perseverance in the economic fight for survival, like those techniques of 'self-experience' which put the encounter of our 'true Self' in the service of our 'fitness'.

It is, of course, easy to assume an ironic distance towards the Protestant illusion and to point out how the final result of Protestant endeavour to abolish the gap between religion and everyday life was the abasement of religion to a 'therapeutic' means. What is far more difficult is to conceive the *necessity* of Protestantism as the 'vanishing mediator' between medieval corporatism and capitalist individualism. In other words, the point not to be missed is that

one cannot pass from medieval 'closed' society to bourgeois society immediately, i.e. without the intercession of Protestantism *qua* 'vanishing mediator'. It is Protestantism which, by means of its universalisation of Christianity, prepares the ground for its withdrawal into the sphere of privacy. In the political domain, a similar role was played by Jacobinism which can even be determined as 'political Protestantism'. Jacobinism universalises in the same way the democratic political-ideological project, i.e. it doesn't grasp it as a merely formal political principle without immediate bearing on economic, family, etc. relations, but endeavours to make the democratic-egalitarian project into a principle structuring the totality of social life. The trap into which Jacobinism fell is also the same. Unknowingly, its political radicalism prepared the way for its opposite, for the bourgeois universe of egotistic and acquisitive individuals who don't care a pin for egalitarian moralism. Here, too, it is easy to assume an ironic distance and point out how the Jacobins, by means of their violent reduction of the social totality to the abstract principle of equality, necessarily finished in terrorism, since this reduction is resisted by the ramified network of concrete relations that characterise civil society (cf. Hegel's classical criticism of the Jacobins in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*). What is far more difficult to accomplish is to demonstrate why no immediate passage was possible from the *ancien regime* to the egotistic bourgeois everyday life, i.e. why, precisely because of their illusory reduction of social totality to the democratic political project, the Jacobins were a *necessary* 'vanishing mediator' (therein, not in the commonplaces about the utopian-terrorist character of the Jacobinical project, consists the effective point of Hegel's criticism). In other words, it is easy to detect in Jacobinism the roots and the first form of the modern 'totalitarianism'. It is far more difficult and disquieting to acknowledge and accept fully the fact that, without the Jacobinical 'excess', there would be no 'normal' pluralist democracy.<sup>6</sup>

That is to say, the illusion in which Protestantism and Jacobinism are caught is more complicated than it may seem in a first approach. It doesn't consist simply in their naive-moralistic universalisation of the Christian or egalitarian-democratic project, i.e. in their overlooking the concrete wealth of social relations that resist such an immediate universalisation. Their illusion is far more radical: it is of the same nature as the illusion of all historically relevant political utopias, the illusion to which Marx drew attention a propos of Plato's *State* when he remarked that Plato didn't see how what he really described was not a yet unrealised ideal but the fundamental structure of the existing Greek state. In other words, utopias are 'utopian' not because they depict an 'impossible ideal', a dream not for this world, but because they misrecognise the way their ideal state *is already realised* in its basic content ('in its notion', as Hegel would say). Protestantism becomes superfluous and it can vanish as a mediator the moment the social reality is structured as a 'Protestant universe'. The notional structure of capitalist civil society is that of the world of atomised individuals defined by the paradox of 'acquisitive asceticism' ('the more you possess, the more you must renounce consumption'), i.e. the structure of the Protestant content without its positive religious form. And it is the same with Jacobinism. What Protestantism and Jacobinism overlooked is the fact that the Ideal after which they strove was, in its notional structure, *already realised* in their 'dirty' acquisitive activity which appeared to them as the betrayal of their high ideals. The vulgar, egotistical bourgeois everyday life is the actuality of freedom, equality and brotherhood; freedom of free trade, formal equality in the eyes of law, etc. The illusion proper to the 'vanishing mediators' – Protestants, Jacobins – is precisely that of the Hegelian 'beautiful soul'. They refuse to acknowledge in the corrupted reality over

which they lament the ultimate consequence of their own act, i.e., as Lacan would put it, their own message in its true, inverted form. And no lesser is the illusion of us, 'sobered' inheritors of Protestantism and Jacobinism. We perceive those 'vanishing mediators' as aberrations or excesses, failing to notice how we are nothing but 'Jacobins without the Jacobinical form', nothing but 'Protestants without the Protestant form'.

### ... and other 'vanishing mediators'

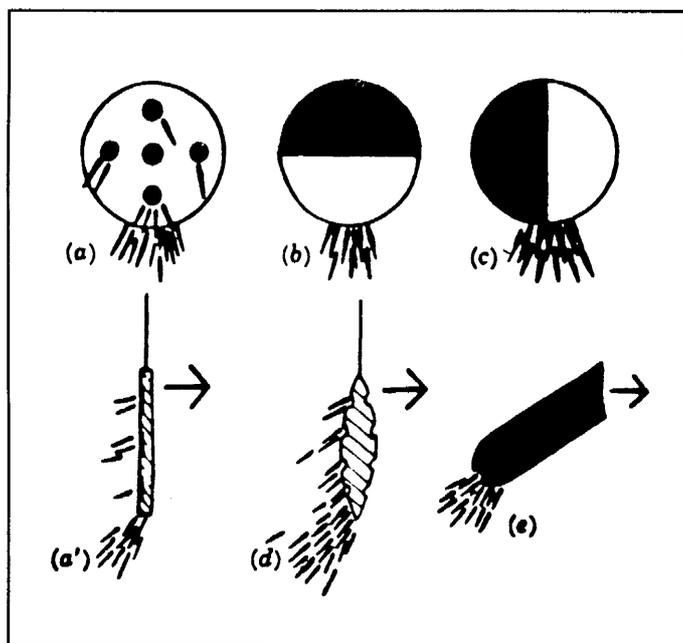
This gap between the form and its notional content offers us also the key to the *necessity* of the 'vanishing mediator'. The passage from feudalism to Protestantism is not of the same nature as the passage from Protestantism to the bourgeois everyday life with its privatised religion. The first passage concerns 'content' (under the guise of preserving the religious form or even its strengthening, the crucial shift – the assertion of the ascetic-acquisitive stance in economic activity as the domain of the manifestation of Grace – takes place), whereas the second passage is a purely formal act, a change of form (as soon as Protestantism is realised as the ascetic-acquisitive stance, it can fall off as form). The 'vanishing mediator' emerges therefore because of the way, in a dialectical process, form stays behind content. First, the crucial shift occurs within the limits of the old form, even taking the appearance of its renewed assertion (the universalisation of Christianity, return to its 'true content', etc.). Then, once the 'silent weaving of the spirit' (Hegel) finishes its work, the old form can fall off. The double scansion of this process enables us to grasp in a concrete way the worn-out formula of the 'negation of negation'. The first 'negation' consists in a slow, underground, invisible change of substantial content which, paradoxically, takes place *in the name of its own form*. Then, once the form has lost its substantial right, it falls to pieces by itself, i.e. the very form of negation is negated or, to use the classical Hegelian couple, the change which took place 'in itself' becomes 'for itself'.

This picture should be complicated even a step further. A closer look reveals the presence of *two* 'vanishing mediators' in the passage from feudal to bourgeois political structure, absolute monarchy and Jacobinism. The first is the sign, the embodiment of a paradoxical compromise; the political form enabling the rising bourgeoisie to strengthen its economic hegemony by breaking the economic power of feudalism, of its guilds and corporations. What is paradoxical about it is of course the fact that feudalism 'digs its grave' precisely by absolutising its own crowning point, i.e. by giving absolute power to the monarch. The result of absolute monarchy is thus a political order 'disconnected' from its economic foundation. And the same 'disconnection' characterises Jacobinism: it is already a commonplace to determine Jacobinism as a radical ideology which 'takes literally' the bourgeois political programme (equality, freedom, brotherhood) and endeavours to realise it irrespective of the concrete articulation of civil society. Both paid dearly for their illusion. The absolute monarch noticed too late that society praised him as almighty only to allow one class to oust another. The Jacobins also became superfluous once their job of destroying the apparatus of the *ancien regime* was done. Both were carried away by the illusion of the autonomy of the political sphere. Both believed in their political mission; one in the unquestionable character of royal authority, the other in the pertinence of its political project. And, on another level, could not the same be said for fascism and Communism, viz. 'really existing socialism'? Is not fascism a kind of inherent self-negation of capitalism, an attempt to 'change something so that nothing would really change' by means of an ideology which subordinates the economy to the ideological-

political domain? Is not the Leninist 'actually existing socialism' a kind of 'socialist Jacobinism', an attempt to subordinate the entire socioeconomic life immediately to the political regulation of the socialist state? Both are 'vanishing mediators', but into what? The usual cynical answer 'from capitalism back to capitalism' seems a little bit too easy.

The inversion of the 'normal' relationship of 'content' ('economic base') and its ideological 'form' which renders possible the anti-Marxist reading of Weber consists therefore in the above-described 'emancipation of form from its content that characterises the 'vanishing mediator'. The break of Protestantism with the medieval Church does not 'reflect' new social content, but is rather *the criticism of the old feudal content in the name of the radicalised version of its own ideological form*. It is this 'emancipation' of the Christian form from its own social content that opens up the space for the gradual transformation of the old into the new (capitalist) content. In this way, it is easy for Jameson to demonstrate how Weber's theory of the crucial role of Protestantism in the emergence of capitalism affects only vulgar economism and is quite compatible with the *dialectic* of 'base' and ideological 'superstructure' according to which one passes from one to another social formation through a 'vanishing mediator' which *inverts* the relationship of 'base' and 'superstructure': by emancipating itself from its own 'base'. The old 'superstructure' prepares the terrain for the transformation of the 'base'. The classical Marxist theoretical edifice is thus saved. The 'emancipation' of the ideological form is explained from the inner antagonism of the 'base' itself: it emerges when these antagonisms become so violent that they can no longer be legitimised by their own ideological form.

There is an inherently *tragic* ethical dimension proper to this 'emancipation' of the ideological superstructure: it presents a unique point at which an ideology 'takes itself literally' and ceases to function as 'objectively-cynical' (Marx) legitimisation



of the existing power relations. Let us mention another, more contemporary case; the 'new social movements' that emerged during the last years of 'actually existing socialism' in Eastern Europe, movements whose exemplary representative is *Neues Forum* in the GDR, groups of passionate intellectuals who 'took socialism seriously' and were prepared to stake all in order to destroy the compromised system and replace it with the utopian 'third way' beyond capitalism and 'actually existing' socialism.

Their sincere belief and insistence that they are not working for the restoration of Western capitalism proved itself of course to be nothing but an illusion without substance. However, we could say that precisely as such (as a thorough illusion without substance) it was *strictu sensu non-ideological*: it didn't 'reflect' in inverted-ideological form any actual relations of power. At this point, we should correct the Marxist Vulgate: contrary to the commonplace according to which an ideology becomes 'cynical' (accepts the gap between 'words' and 'acts', doesn't 'believe in itself' any more, isn't experienced any more as truth but treats itself as pure instrumental means of legitimising power) in the period of the 'decadence' of a social formation, it should be said that precisely the period of 'decadence' opens up to the ruling ideology the possibility of 'taking itself seriously' and effectively opposing itself to its own social basis (with Protestantism, Christian religion opposes feudalism as its social basis, the same as with *Neues Forum* which opposes the existing socialism in the name of 'true socialism'). This way, unknowingly, it unchains the forces of its own final destruction: once their job is done, they are 'overrun by history' (*Neues Forum* scored 3% at the elections) and a new 'scoundrel time' sets in, with people in power who were mostly silent during the Communist repression and who nonetheless now abuse *Neues Forum* as 'crypto-Communists'.

### A beat of your finger...

Is, however, this reading where the 'vanishing mediator' effectively appears as just a mediator, an intermediate figure between the two 'normal' states of things, the only one possible? The conceptual apparatus elaborated by 'post-Marxist' political theory (Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau) allows for another reading which radically shifts the perspective. Within this field, the moment of 'vanishing mediator' is the moment defined by Alain Badiou' as that of the 'event' in relation to the established structure; the moment when its 'truth' emerges, the moment of 'openness' which, once the eruption of the 'event' is institutionalised into a new positivity, is lost or, more precisely, becomes literally *invisible*.

According to the well-known commonplace (which, unusually, is not a stupidity clothed in wisdom), 'after the fact', backwards, History can always be read as a process governed by laws, i.e. as a meaningful succession of stages. However, in so far as we are its agents, embedded, caught in the process, the situation appears – at least during the turning points when 'something is happening' – open, undecidable, far from the exposition of an underlying necessity. We find ourselves confronted with responsibility, the burden of decision pressing upon our shoulders. Let us just recall the October Revolution. Retroactively, it is easy to locate it within the wider historical process, to show how it emerged out of the specific situation of Russia with its failed modernisation and simultaneous presence of 'islands of modernity' (highly developed working class in isolated places) – in short, it is not too difficult to compose a sociological treatise on this theme. However, it is sufficient to reread the passionate polemics between Lenin, Trotsky, Mensheviks and other participants to find oneself face to face with what is lost in such an 'objective' historical account, the burden of decision in a situation which so to speak *forced* the agents to invent new solutions and make unheard-of moves without any guarantee in 'general laws of historical development'.

This 'impossible' moment of openness constitutes the moment of *subjectivity*. 'Subject' is a name for that unfathomable X called upon, suddenly made accountable, thrown into a position of responsibility, into the urgency of decision in such a moment of undecidability. This is the way one has to read Hegel's proposition that the True is to be grasped 'not only as *Substance*,

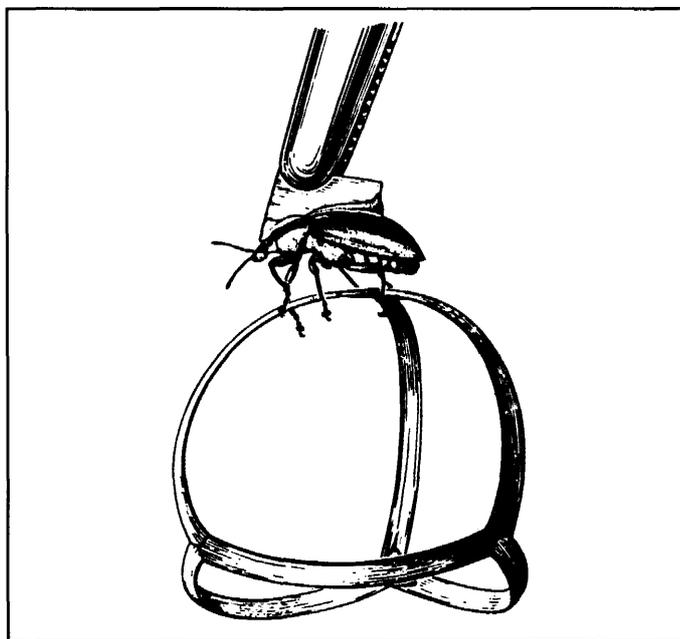
but equally as *Subject*,<sup>8</sup> not only as an objective process governed by some hidden rational Necessity (even if this Necessity assumes the Hegelian shape of the 'cunning of Reason'), but also as a process punctuated, scansioned by the moments of openness/undecidability when the subject's irreducibly contingent *act* establishes new Necessity. According to a well-known *doxa*, the dialectical approach enables us to penetrate the surface play of contingencies and reach the underlying rational necessity which 'runs the show' behind the subject's back. A proper Hegelian dialectical move is almost the exact inversion of this procedure. It disperses the fetish of 'objective historical process' and enables us to see its genesis, the way the historical Necessity sprang up as a positivisation, as a 'coagulation' of a radically contingent *decision* of the subjects in an open, undecidable situation. 'Dialectical Necessity' is always, by definition, a necessity *après coup*. A proper dialectical account calls in question the self-evidence of 'what actually took place' and confronts it with what did *not* take place, i.e. it considers what did not happen (a series of missed opportunities, of 'alternative histories') a constituent part of what 'effectively happened'. If 'dialectics' doesn't mean *also* this, then all the talk about 'substance as subject' is ultimately null and we are back at Reason *qua* substantial Necessity pulling the strings behind the stage.

It is against this background that we must conceive Hegel's thesis on 'positing of presuppositions'. This retroactive positing is precisely the way Necessity arises out of contingency. The moment when the subject 'posits its presuppositions' is the very moment of its effacement as subject, *the moment it vanishes as a mediator*, the moment of closure when the subject's act of decision changes into its opposite, i.e. establishes a new symbolic network by means of which History again acquires the self-evidence of a linear evolution. Let us return to the October Revolution. Its 'presuppositions' were 'posited' when, after its victory and consolidation of the new power, the openness of the situation was again lost, i.e. when it was again possible to assume the position of an 'objective observer' and narrate the linear progression of events, ascertaining how the Soviet power broke the imperialist chain in its weakest link and thus started a new epoch of world history, etc. In this strict sense, the subject is a 'vanishing mediator'. Its act succeeds by becoming invisible, i.e. by 'positivising' itself in a new symbolic network wherein it locates and explains itself as a result of historical process, thus reducing itself to a mere moment of the totality engendered by its own act. Witness the Stalinist position of pure metalanguage where (contrary to the commonplaces about 'proletarian science', etc.) the very engagement of Marxist theory on the side of the proletariat, its 'partisanship', its 'taking sides', is not conceived as something *inherent* to the theory as such – Marxists did not speak *from* the subjective position of the proletariat, they 'based their orientation on' the proletariat from an external, neutral, 'objective' position:

In the eighties of the past century, in the period of the struggle between the Marxists and the Narodniks, the proletariat in Russia constituted an insignificant minority of the population, whereas the individual peasants constituted the vast majority of the population. But the proletariat was developing as a class, whereas the peasantry as a class was disintegrating. And just because the proletariat was developing as a class the Marxists based their orientation on the proletariat. And they were not mistaken, for, as we know, the proletariat subsequently grew from an insignificant force into a first-rate historical and political force.<sup>9</sup>

The crucial question to be asked here is, of course: at the time

of their struggle against the Narodniks, *where did the Marxists speak from* so as to be subject to mistakes in their choice of the proletariat as the basis of their orientation? Obviously from an external point encompassing the historical process as a field of objective forces, where one must 'be careful of not being mistaken', and 'be guided by just forces', i.e. those that will win – in short, where one must 'bet on the right horse'. Read this way, i.e. retroactively, the decision on how to act *follows* the 'objective'



evaluation: first, we view the situation from a neutral, 'objective' position; then, after ascertaining which are the forces likely to win, we decide to 'base our orientation on them'. This retroactive narration, however, falls prey to a kind of illusion of perspective: it misrecognises the crucial fact that 'the true reason for deciding only becomes apparent once the decision has been taken'.<sup>10</sup> In other words, reasons for 'basing our orientation on' the proletariat only becomes apparent to those who *already speak from the proletarian subjective position* – or, as perspicacious theologians would put it, of course there are good reasons to believe in Jesus Christ, but these reasons are fully comprehensible only to those who already believe in Him. And the same goes also for the famous Leninist theory of the 'weakest link' in the chain of imperialism: one doesn't first ascertain *via* an objective approach which is this weakest link and then take the decision to strike at this point – the very act of decision *defines* the 'weakest link'. This is what is called by Lacan *act*: a move that, so to speak, *defines its own conditions*, i.e. retroactively produces grounds which justify it:

What is impossible for those who count on an objective appraisal of conditions is that a gesture could create conditions which, retroactively, justify it and make it appropriate. It is, however, attested that this is what happens and that the aim is not to see things correctly, but to blind oneself sufficiently to be able to strike the right way, i.e. the way that disperses.<sup>11</sup>

The act is thus 'performative' in a way which exceeds the 'speech act': its performativity is 'retroactive', i.e. it redefines the network of its own presuppositions. This 'excess' of the act's retroactive performativity can also be formulated in the terms of the Hegelian dialectics of law and its transgression, Crime. From the perspective of the existing, positive laws of a symbolic community, an act appears per definition as Crime, since it

violates its symbolic limits and introduces an unheard-of element which turns everything topsy-turvy. There is neither rhyme nor reason in an act. An act is by its very nature scandalous, as was the appearing of Christ in the eyes of the keepers of the existing law, i.e. before Christ was 'christianised', made part of the new law of Christian tradition. And the dialectical genesis renders visible again the 'scandalous' origins of the existing law – let us just recall Chesterton's perspicacious remark about how the detective story

keeps in some sense before the mind the fact that civilisation itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions. ... When the detective in a police romance stands alone, and somewhat fatuously fearless amid the knives and fists of a thieves' kitchen, it does certainly serve to make us remember that it is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure, while the burglars and footpads are merely placid old cosmic conservatives, happy in the immemorial respectability of apes and wolves. The romance of the police force is thus the whole romance of man. It is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies.<sup>12</sup>

The dialectical approach brings to the light of day this forgotten reverse of law, the way law itself coincides with supreme criminal transgression. And an act 'succeeds' the moment it 'sutures' anew its own past, its own conditions, effacing its 'scandalous' character. The act is the emergence of a new master-signifier, that supplementary 'beat of your finger' which, miraculously, changes the previous chaos into 'new harmony':

A beat of your finger on the drum discharges the sounds and begins the new harmony.  
A step by you, and new men arise and set on their march.  
Your head turns away: the new love! Your head turns back: the new love!  
(Rimbaud, *A une raison*)

What is lost after the onset of the 'new harmony' is the radically contingent, 'scandalous', abyssal character of the new master-signifier. Witness, for example, the transformation of Lenin into a wise figure who 'saw it all and foresaw it all', Stalinism included, within the Leninist hagiography. Which is why it is only today, after the breakdown of Leninism, that it becomes possible to approach Lenin as an actor in the historical drama, capable of making unforeseen moves that were, as Leszek Kolakowski put it succinctly, the right mistakes at the right time.

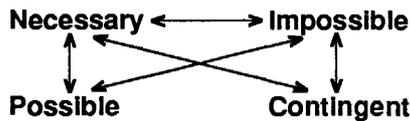
### **Why is truth always political?**

This notion of the act immediately bears on the relationship between Social and Political, i.e. on the difference between 'the Political' and 'politics', as it was elaborated by Lefort<sup>13</sup> and Laclau,<sup>14</sup> the difference between 'politics' *qua* separate social complex, positively determined subsystem of social relations in interaction with other subsystems (economy, forms of culture...), and 'the Political (*le Politique*)' *qua* the moment of openness, of undecidability, when the very structuring principle of society, the fundamental form of social pact, is called in question – in short, the moment of global crisis overcome by the act of founding a 'new harmony'. The 'political' dimension is thus *doubly inscribed*: it is a moment of the social whole, one among its subsystems, *and* the very terrain in which the fate of the whole is decided, i.e. in which the new pact is designed and concluded.<sup>15</sup> In social theory one usually conceives the political dimension as

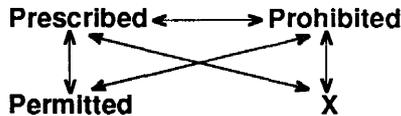
secondary in relation to the Social as such; in positivist sociology, as a subsystem by means of which society organises its self-regulation; in Marxism, as the separate sphere of alienated Universality which results from society's class division (with the underlying implication that a classless society would entail the end of the Political as a separate sphere). Even in the ideology of some of the 'new social movements', the Political is delimited as the domain of state power against which civil society must organise its self-defensive regulatory mechanisms. Against these notions, one should risk the hypothesis that the very genesis of society is always 'political'. A positively existing social system is nothing but a form in which the negativity of a radically contingent decision assumes positive, determinate existence. It was no accident that the Jacobins, those 'vanishing mediators' *par excellence*, 'absolutised the political'. The reproach that they failed because they wanted to make of politics, one of the social subsystems, the structuring principle of the entire social edifice, overlooks the crucial fact that with the Jacobins, the political dimension was not one among the subsystems but designated the emergence of a radical negativity rendering possible the new foundation of the social fabric. *They vanished not because of their weakness but because of their very success*, i.e. when their work was accomplished. In more 'semiotic' terms, we could say that politics *qua* subsystem is a *metaphor* of the political subject, of the Political *qua* subject; the element which, within the constituted social space, holds the place of the Political *qua* negativity which suspends it and founds it anew. In other words, 'politics' as 'subsystem', as a separate sphere of society, represents *within* society its own forgotten foundation, its genesis in a violent, abyssal Act. It represents, within the social space, what must *fall out* if this space is to constitute itself. Here, we can easily recognise the Lacanian definition of the signifier (that which 'represents the subject for another signifier'): politics *qua* subsystem represents the Political (subject) for all other social subsystems. It is for that reason that positivist sociologists attempt desperately to convince us that politics is just a subsystem. It is as if the very desperate and urgent tone of this persuading echoes an imminent danger of 'explosion' whereby politics would again 'be all', i.e. change into 'political'. There is an unmistakable *normative* undertone to this persuading, bestowing on it an air of conjuration: it *must remain* a mere subsystem...

What is at stake in the two possible readings of the paradox of 'vanishing mediator' is therefore the very status of social antagonism *viz.* negativity. Is the emergence of negativity in the social space a mere intermediary in the passage from one to another form of positivity, the 'exception' that characterises the transition from one to another 'normalcy', or is this very 'normalcy' nothing but the aftermath, the 'gentrification' of a forgotten excess of negativity? The second solution reverses the entire perspective: the stable network of 'subsystems' is the very form of hegemony of one pole in the social antagonism, the 'class peace' the very index of the hegemony of one class in the class struggle. What is lost once the network of 'subsystems' is stabilised, i.e. once the 'new harmony' is established, once the new Order 'posits its presuppositions', 'sutures' its field, is the *metaphoricity* of the element which represents its genesis. This element is reduced to being 'one among the others', it loses its character of *One which holds the place of Nothing* (of radical negativity). Now, we can return to the notorious Hegelian triad; the subject is this 'vanishing mediator', the fourth moment which so to speak enacts its own disappearance, i.e. whose disappearance is the very measure of its 'success', the void of self-relating negativity which becomes invisible once we look at the process 'backwards', from its Result. The consideration of this excessive fourth moment at work in the Hegelian triad enables us to read it against the

background of the Greimasian 'semiotic square':



The opposition of necessity and impossibility dissolves itself into the domain of possibility (possibility is, so to speak, the 'negation of negation' of necessity) – what disappears therewith is the fourth term, the Contingent which is in no way equal to the Possible. There is always something of an 'encounter with the Real' in contingency, something of the violent emergence of an unheard-of entity that defies the limits of the established field of what one holds for 'possible', whereas 'possible' is, so to speak, a 'gentrified', pacified contingency, a contingency with its sting plucked out. In psychoanalysis, for example, *truth* belongs to the order of contingency.<sup>16</sup> We vegetate in our everyday life, deep into the universal Lie that structures it, when, all of a sudden, some totally contingent encounter – a casual remark by a friend, an incident we witness – evokes the memory of an old repressed trauma and shatters our self-delusion. Psychoanalysis is here radically anti-Platonic: the Universal is the domain of Falsity *par excellence*, whereas truth emerges as a particular contingent encounter which renders visible its 'repressed'.<sup>17</sup> The dimension lost in 'possibility' is precisely this traumatic, unwarranted character of the emergence of truth. When a truth becomes 'possible', it loses the character of an 'event', it changes into a mere factual accuracy and thereby becomes part of the ruling universal Lie. What we aim at here comes to light more clearly if we replace the 'ontological' square by the 'deontological' one:



We lack the appropriate term for this X, for the strange status of what is 'not prescribed', 'facultative', and yet not simply 'permitted', for this 'you may...' which is not yet 'you can...', as, for example, the emergence of some hitherto forbidden knowledge in the psychoanalytic cure which holds up to ridicule the Prohibition, lays bare its hidden mechanism, without thereby changing into a neutral 'permissiveness'. The difference between the two pertains to the different relationship towards the universal Order. 'Permissiveness' is warranted by it, whereas this guarantee lacks in the case of 'you may...' which Lacan designates as *scilicet*: you may know (the truth about your desire) – if you take the risk upon yourself. This *scilicet* is perhaps the ultimate recourse of the critical thought.

## Notes

- 1 *Hegel's Science of Logic*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1969, p. 836.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Ueber einige Schwierigkeiten des Komponierens heute', in *Aspekte der Modernität*, edited by H. Steffen, Goettingen, 1986, p. 133.
- 3 The complementary reverse of this paradox is of course that things must change if they are to remain the same: capitalism is forced to revolutionise its material conditions precisely in order

to maintain the same fundamental relations of production.

- 4 Hence follows the ultimate incompatibility of the Hegelian procedure with the recent 'post-modernist' attempts to oppose to the 'totalitarian', 'monological', 'repressive', 'universalizing' Reason the contours of another plural, polycentric, dialogical, feminine, baroque, etc. Reason (the 'weak thought', for example). From the Hegelian perspective, such a move is simply superfluous: it is already the first ('monological') Reason which reveals itself as *its own opposite*, as soon as we endeavour to grasp it 'in itself', 'as such'.
- 5 Cf. Fredric Jameson, 'The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller', in *The Ideologies of Theory*, vol. 2, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- 6 What is unusual about Jameson's text is that it doesn't mention the role of *Weber himself* as the 'vanishing mediator' between the traditional (pre-positivist) approach to society and twentieth-century sociology *qua* 'objective science'. As Jameson points out, Weber's notion of *Wertfreiheit*, of a value-free stance, is *not yet* the later positivist 'neutrality': it expresses a pre-positivist Nietzschean attitude of distance towards values which enables us to accomplish a 'transvaluation of values' and thus a more efficient intervention into social reality. In other words, *Wertfreiheit* implies a very 'interested' attitude towards reality. Incidentally, doesn't Wittgenstein play the same role in contemporary analytical philosophy: isn't he even a *double* 'vanishing mediator', in relation to classical logical positivism as well as in relation to speech-acts theory? A simple sensitivity for theoretical *finesse* tells us that the most precious aspect of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* gets lost with its systematisation in logical positivism, that 'surplus' with which Russell, Carnap and others didn't know what to do and dismissed as confusion or mysticism (the problem of form *qua* unspeakable and of silence which inscribes the subject of enunciation into the series of propositions, etc.). And it is similar to the codification of speech acts in Searle et al.: we lose a series of paradoxes and borderline questions, from the paradoxical status of 'objective certainty' (which cannot be put in doubt, although it is not necessarily true) to the splitting of the subject of speech acts (the radical discontinuity between 'I' and the proper name).
- 7 Cf. Alain Badiou, *L'être et l'événement*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1988.
- 8 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 10.
- 9 Joseph Stalin, *Selected Writings*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1942, p. 411.
- 10 John Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 189.
- 11 Jean-Claude Milner, *Les noms indistincts*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1983, p. 16.
- 12 G. K. Chesterton, 'A Defence of Detective Stories', in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, edited by H. Haycraft, New York, The Universal Library, 1946, p. 6.
- 13 Cf. Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986.
- 14 Cf. Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London, Verso Books, 1990.
- 15 In Heideggerian terms, we should say that, among the different spheres of social life, only politics is the place where Truth can arrive, where a new way a community discloses itself to itself can be founded.
- 16 Cf. Jean-Claude Milner, *op. cit.*
- 17 The same as with Hegel where words as such belong to the domain of abstract Understanding and are therefore incapable of giving expression to the speculative truth. This truth can emerge only *via* particular contingencies of the wordplay (the three meanings of *Aufhebung*; *zugrundegehen* / to fall to ruin / as *Grunde gehen* / to arrive at one's ground /; etc.).