

## Research Article

Cynthia Cruz\*

# Beyond Negative Freedom and the Working Class Subject: Another Kind of Madness

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0236>

received November 27, 2022; accepted February 17, 2023

**Abstract:** Presented with the (non) choice of either assimilating into bourgeois society and, thus, annihilating themselves, or being annihilated by society, the working class subject may choose, neither, engaging, instead, in an act of negative freedom. By engaging in an act of negative freedom, the working class subject destroys all possibility of rehabilitation, thus, determining their fate. The act alone provides a means by which to mark the outer limits of what they are willing to tolerate. Through the act, the subject is altered, their world is changed. Furthermore, before engaging in the act, they do not know what will happen to them. They are, in other words, stepping into the abyss of unknowing. In this article, I will explore the concept of negative freedom in relation to the working class subject: how engaging in such an act marks their fate, separating them from bourgeois society while, also, setting them free. At the same time, due to its inherent withdrawal from civil society, negative freedom veers dangerously near nihilism, thus, reducing their act to one without meaning.

**Keywords:** Hegel, Marx, nihilism, working class, freedom

*A factory presents a sad picture of the deadening [Abstumpfung] of human beings, which is also why on Sundays factory workers lose no time in spending and squandering their entire weekly wages.*

—Hegel<sup>1</sup>

In an attempt to locate an exit from capitalism, the working class subject, finding themselves trapped in a system wherein they are forced to sell their labor to survive, may engage in an act of negative freedom. Though engaging in an act of negative freedom may indeed result in a temporary reprieve, such acts are self-destructive, often deadly and, in the end, do not provide an exit from capitalism. In addition, the act of negative freedom, in its withdrawal from society, veers dangerously close to nihilism. At the same time, the very system the working class subject is attempting to exit, due to its structure of exchange value wherein all things are made equal and thus, everything loses difference, is rendered meaningless and also, at the same time, nihilistic. How, then, can the working class subject locate an exit from capitalism? Furthermore, how can the working class subject locate an exit that does not return them back to nihilism?

Negative freedom, as a concept, originates in German idealism. In its simplest formulation, it is the ability to say no to everything outside of one's self. Negative freedom is, thus, freedom from interference. It is the ability to abstract from everything. It is the freedom *not* to. As Hegel explains in *Philosophy of Right*:

Only one aspect of the will is defined here – namely this *absolute possibility of abstracting* from every determination in which I find myself or which I have posited in myself, the flight from every content as a limitation. If the will determines itself in this way, or if representational thought [*die Vorstellung*] considers this aspect in itself [*für sich*] as freedom and holds fast to it, this is negative freedom or the freedom of understanding. This is the freedom of the void [...]<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science*, 177.

<sup>2</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 38.

\* **Corresponding author: Cynthia Cruz**, Department of Philosophy, Art, & Critical Thought, European Graduate School, Visp, Switzerland, e-mail: cindyskylar@gmail.com

In contrast, for Hegel, abstract, or affirmative freedom, is the freedom *to*. This freedom is the freedom to choose what one wants, the ability to choose among possibilities. This is the freedom one speaks of in capitalist society, and what Hegel also calls empty freedom, such freedom is the freedom to do, say and buy what one wants. Hegel also calls this type of freedom “arbitrary freedom”:

Since I have the possibility of determining myself in this or that direction – that is, since I am able to choose – I possess an arbitrary will, and this is what is usually called freedom. The common man thinks that he is free when he is allowed to act arbitrarily, but this very arbitrariness implies that he is not free.<sup>3</sup>

One must be able to posit something, discern that one wants or does not want that thing. This ability to mediate is crucial. Without the ability to decide that one wants or does not want a thing, one is unable to decide what one wants. If I accept external beliefs into my being, without first determining what they are and whether I want them, then I am not free because these beliefs have been created outside myself without my having determined what they are and whether or not I am able to see myself in them. Implicit in the freedom *to* is the assumption that what is on offer includes what one wants. But what if a subject does not want what is on offer, what if they do not want what society offers? If society does not offer what one wants, then one does not have the freedom to choose. One cannot choose from what does not exist. If one has only the freedom to say no to society, a society that does not offer what one wants, then one is not free. For true freedom, according to Hegel, one must have both types of freedom: both the ability *to* and the ability *not to*.

It is by internalizing the external, by recognizing the world and its laws, and taking these as one’s own that a subject is able to feel at home in their society. Necessary to this process, though, is that the subject understands the laws and their individual rights: they must be able to determine what the laws are, what they do, and who they are meant to protect. Recognizing the laws of the state as representing them is critical. Without this, the process of internalizing the external, of taking in or saying yes to one’s society, cannot happen. If I am ignorant of the laws of my government, I will be unable to make these laws my own. They will exist outside of myself. I will submit to the laws without understanding them. At the same time, the state must represent its subjects. If the state does not represent its subjects, its subject will be unable to internalize the state and its laws. Without this mutual integration, the subject is not free, as Hegel writes in *Philosophy of Right*:

The association of duty and right has a dual aspect, in that what the state requires as a duty should also in an immediate sense be the right of individuals, for it is nothing more than the organization of the concept of freedom. The determinations of the will of the individual acquire an objective existence through the state, and it is only through the state that they attain their truth and actualization.<sup>4</sup>

This symbiosis is essential as Hegel writes, “This world outside him has its threads in him in such a way that what he actually is *for himself*, consists of *these threads*; so that he too would die away internally together with the disappearance of these externalities [...]”<sup>5</sup>

The subject who is not represented by the state and who does not feel at home in society is the working class subject. The working class subject does not recognize the state as a representation of themselves because the state does not represent them. Though the worker is integral to capitalism – it is their labor that animates capitalist society – it is the bourgeoisie and their interests that are represented and protected by the state. Thus, the worker does not feel at home in capitalist society because they are exploited subjects. Furthermore, though work is presented as a choice, the worker has no choice. With no means to survive and with their only means of survival being the power of their labor, the worker is forced to use their labor by working for the capitalist. Should they choose not to work, they will most certainly not survive. And yet, according to the law, both the worker and capitalist are equal, as Marx writes, “He and the owner of money meet in the market, and enter into relations with each other on a footing of equality as owners of

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>5</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, 96.

commodities, with the sole difference that one is a buyer, the other a seller; both are therefore equal in the eyes of the law.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, the worker’s labor is spent not building their own home or nourishing their family, but, rather, making objects for the capitalist to sell for profit. Choice, then, is limited for the working class. The worker can choose not to go to work. But if they choose not to work, they and their family will go without food and shelter, clothing and medicine, and so forth. If, instead, the worker makes the determination to work for the capitalist so that they and their family might survive, doing so will result in the ruination of their mind and their body.

The working class subject, under capitalism, is trapped in an infinite circuit of labor. When at work, their labor is actively ruining their mind and body. When away from work, their mind and body are haunted by the mechanistic movements that occur during their work hours. The mechanism of labor, whether that be counting plastic bits from the conveyor belt, pressing buttons on the cash register, or gathering and delivering meals by bicycle through the cold streets of the city, enters and alters the mind and body of the worker. Its repetitive movement changes the relationship they have with their body, it changes the way they think, and it alters their sense of time and space. All hours of the day and night are work. The machinery, in other words, of the worker’s labor, changes the worker, making them not master of the machine but, rather, a mere appendage to it. Overwhelmed by capital, the worker’s mind and body, along with all the moments of their life, are subsumed by it.

In an attempt to locate a reprieve from capitalism, the worker may turn to religion. Religion can provide solace, as well as an alternative world, one where one’s suffering on earth is payment for the better, truer life, promised after one’s death. And yet, in its promise of an afterlife, religion makes oblivion of reality while, at the same time, repressing the workers’ rage and despair. Rather than offering a pathway out of their suffering, by locating its source, religion offers, instead, a mere simulacra of freedom. As with stoicism, religion, with its belief that freedom exists within one’s own mind, places responsibility for the subject’s suffering in their hands. It is one’s thinking that is the cause of one’s suffering. Thus, by thinking differently, subjects can mitigate their suffering. This is the inner strength of the slave whose sense of mastery derives from believing themselves to be strong and free, though they remain enslaved. As Hegel writes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* “Freedom in thought only has *pure thoughts* as its truth, a truth without any fulfillment in life, and thus it is also not living freedom itself but only the concept of freedom, and, initially it is, to itself, only *thinking* itself which is its essence.”<sup>7</sup>

Where to go when there is nowhere to go? Negative freedom is the ability to abstract from everything. The most obvious example of this is the act of withdrawing from society. But negative freedom can also take the form of drinking, using drugs to excess or engaging in an act of crime. Acts of negative freedom are inherently destructive. At the same time, they can also provide a temporary reprieve from reality. And by engaging in an act of negative freedom, for instance in an act of crime, the working class subject determines their fate. By doing so, such acts both mark a limit while, at the same time, marking themselves as belonging outside this newly constructed limit. When, for instance, I throw a rock through the window of a bank, the act establishes a threshold. Without speaking, I am saying, through my engagement in this act, *No*. I am drawing a line around myself, marking the barriers of what I am willing to accept.

By participating in an act of negative freedom, I am doing two things. First, by engaging in a subversive, antisocial act, I set myself apart from society. Through this act, an alternative space, one cut off from society, appears. Furthermore, when, for instance, I throw a rock through the window of a bank, breaking the glass, setting off the alarms, alerting security and police, I have put into place, by this mere act, a new structure in which I am now on the other side of society. If I don’t make a quick escape from the place I was standing when I threw the rock through the glass window of the bank, I will be apprehended by the police and arrested. By this one simple act, I have set in motion a series of acts that I cannot now relinquish. I have fixed my fate. Furthermore, such acts, by destroying everything, create the possibility for something entirely new. When for instance I am arrested for shoplifting or for throwing a rock into a bank window,

<sup>6</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 272–3.

<sup>7</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 119.

this act of crime will be on my record. I will, from the moment I engaged in the act, be a criminal. The act, in other words, will have resulted in a radical change. After the act, I will not be the same. The world will no longer be the same. Passing through the act of crime, the subject's very being is altered.

Engaging in an act of negative freedom can provide a temporary exit from the destruction of labor. By engaging in an act of negative freedom – by withdrawing from the bourgeois world – the working class subject has access, albeit temporarily, to their interior life, to their mind. And yet, aside from being self-destructive, such acts are also limited. Though they provide a temporary exit, and thus may well be necessary for one's survival, acts of negative freedom are individual acts. The solution, in other words, isolates the worker further. At the same time, it ensures the foreclosure of a communal solution. In his recent writing on the TV series *Breaking Bad*, Christoph Menke<sup>8</sup> describes the rupture that occurs when Walter White is awoken from the oblivion of his day-to-day existence. While viewing an image (of money), White experiences a “break” from the mechanical stupor within which he is living. At that moment, there appears the possibility of something radical, something entirely new. As Menke writes, “*Mit diesem Blick ist es geschehen. Die Gewohnheit ist durchbrochen, die Möglichkeit von etwas anderem ist da.*”<sup>9</sup> It is from this germ of potential that White's actions, and indeed, the show's series, self-generate in a succession of repetitive movements that lead, in the end, not to liberation but rather, to failure. As Menke writes, Walter White chooses self-liberation. Comparing this ending with that of the Exodus story, Menke writes that the Exodus is radical due to its commitment to the communal, to the covenant, while Walter White's self-liberation ends in his self-destruction because it is a liberation without covenant.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, negative freedom veers dangerously near nihilism. Negative freedom, by withdrawing from society, says that life, living among others in a society, is without meaning or that it is simply not worth it. Inherent in nihilism, whether it be the result of radical skepticism, an infinite questioning of everything down to meaninglessness, or in response to a sense of overall sense of meaninglessness in the world, the subject withdraws, entertaining only their own subjective thoughts, the result is that in the end everything becomes equally meaningless, all distinctions are canceled out. Such a leveling down of society is the result of bourgeois society and its law of equality, as Hegel articulates in *The Philosophy of Right*:

An example of this was the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, during which all differences of talents and authority were supposed to be canceled out [*aufgehoben*].... For fanaticism wills only what is abstract, not what is articulated, so yet whenever differences emerge, it finds them incompatible with its own indeterminacy and cancels them out [*hebt sie auf*]. This is why the people, during the French Revolution, destroyed once more the institutions they had themselves created, because all institutions are incompatible with the abstract self-consciousness of equality.<sup>11</sup>

For Hegel, paradoxically, the French Revolution was both a “glorious mental dawn,” an event whose anniversary he celebrated each year while, at the same time, he recognized its having unleashed a yet-un-contained force of terror of which he would write that it could “produce neither a positive work nor a positive deed, and there remains for it only the negative doing. It is only the fury of disappearing.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, with its structure of exchange value, the French Revolution resulted in a world in which all aspects of life become calculable and commodified. Because everything is exchangeable, everything becomes the same, losing distinction, and thus, losing meaning. As Marx writes, “Just as in money, every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished, so too for its part, as a radical leveler, it extinguishes all differences.”<sup>13</sup> This leveling down of everything, wherein difference no longer exist, ends in indifference, *Gleichgültigkeit*. Inherent to capitalism, thus, is a lack of meaning, meaninglessness: nihilism.

<sup>8</sup> Menke, “*Breaking Bad*,” 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 343.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 229.

An endless questioning that renders all things equal, and thus, without meaning, is no less lacking than an attempt to locate truth through the limit of one's subjective mind. Both roads lead to nihilism as Hegel writes:

The study of philosophy is hindered by the conduct of only clever argumentation, but it is hindered equally as much by the kind of acculturation which refuses to engage in such clever argumentation and which instead bases itself on widely accepted truths. The processor of those widely accepted truths thinks he has no need to re-examine them; rather, he takes them to be fundamental, and he believes he is enabled not only to assert them but to be both judge and jury by means of them.<sup>14</sup>

And, indeed, for Heidegger, the oblivion of nihilism results in the forgetting of the difference between being and beings so that, in the end, all that remains are beings: the very essence of being annihilated in forgetting. In his lectures on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger addresses this fundamental forgetting:

Have we not always already and long since *found our way* with this find, so that we pay no heed to it at all, pay so little heed to it that instead in all our comportment toward beings we fundamentally fail to hear the being of beings – fail to hear it in such a way that we arrive at the opinion, perhaps strange and even impossible, that we could just stick to beings and dispense with being?<sup>15</sup>

Both the subject who retreats entirely into their interior – fleeing from the world – and one who is stuck in capitalism's infinite flow – unaware of their own interior – are also equally lacking. Thus, retreating into the self and withdrawing from the world cannot be true forms of freedom. One gains freedom only when one attains autonomy through their engagement with society. As Hegel writes, “But the freedom of mind is not merely an independence of the Other won outside the Other, but won within the Other; it attains actuality not by fleeing from the Other but by overcoming it.”<sup>16</sup>

When the working class subject engages in an act of negative freedom, they often do so unknowingly. The working class subject may find themselves conforming to capitalist society while, simultaneously, unconsciously engaging in acts that sabotage their attempts at assimilation. They may, in other words, consciously wish to conform to their boss's expectations in order to keep their job in order to provide for themselves and their family. At the same time, they may unconsciously resent their boss and everything they stand for. Such a seeming contradiction may transpire in the following way. For instance, a worker may go to work, do their job, and then, without premeditation, without, indeed, any conscious desire to do so, seemingly out of the blue, be overcome by an impulse to steal a coworker's cardigan (an example from Alexandre Kluge's film, *Abschied von Gestern*). By stealing his/her coworker's cardigan, the worker has put themselves in a precarious situation, one which may result in losing their livelihood and also the possibility of ending up in jail. In Kluge's film, Anita G., a young Jewish woman from East Germany, attempts to assimilate into post-War, West Germany without success. The film chronicles Anita G.'s attempts which become ever more desperate as the film progresses.

Near the start of the film, Anita G. is shown in court where she has been summoned for having stolen the cardigan. When asked by the judge to explain her behavior, she offers no explanation or context for her action. Though admitting her guilt – saying, for example, “Yes, I took the cardigan,” and explaining why she engaged in the act – would likely help her appear more conciliatory and thus rehabilitate her in the eyes of the judge, she refuses to do so, insisting, instead, that the act was driven by outside forces, “*Es war alles ganz gefühlsmäßig*,” “It was all very instinctive.” Thus, when she says to the judge, “It was all very instinctual,” she is being entirely transparent. She is telling the judge that she was driven by her instincts to engage in the act. And, though she knows rationally that her only means for survival is to conform, she knows, also, as a Jewish subject in Post-World War II West Germany, that assimilation can only mean

<sup>14</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 355–6.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, 15–6.

forsaking her family, community, and history. The choice she is confronted with between assimilation or annihilation (by attempting to circumnavigate assimilation by suicide) is no choice. By engaging in an act of negative freedom, Anita G. chooses neither.

In the court scene, the judge is unable to understand Anita G., and her answers are unfathomable to him. This inability to comprehend Anita G. is situated at the cut that occurs at West Germany's "Zero Hour." "An absolute break with the past and a radical new beginning," occurring at midnight of May 8, 1945, the "Zero Hour" was West Germany's attempt to disassociate itself from its Nazi past. This "cut" is exemplified by the film's opening where the following quote is presented on the blank film screen, without attribution. "*Uns trennt von gestern kein Abgrund, sondern die veränderte Lage.*" The quote translates in English to "We are separated from yesterday not by an abyss but by the changed situation." Opening the film with this unattributed quote is, itself, a cut, marking the abyss of the "changed situation." West Germany's Nazi history is necessary to provide context for Anita G.'s existence. Without this context, Anita G.'s existence is unfathomable. This is illuminated during the court scene: when she attempts to answer the judge's questions, her responses are incomprehensible to him. He refers to his law books and his own experience, but is unable to make sense of what she is saying. This lack is the result of the cut at the zero hour and the removal of West Germany's past. What has been cut from the beginning of the film remains outside the frame of the film. This erasure is an act of social death – West Germany's Nazi past is where Anita G. and her family exist. This cut makes German-Jewish history unfathomable. This cut, in turn, makes Anita G. unfathomable. She has vanished before the film ever begins. Thus, when she appears in court, she has already been removed from the symbolic order, and she is already a phantom. Erased from social discourse, Anita G., her family, and her history have been relegated outside language. As a result, Anita G. is a Zombie-like subject, propelled blindly by the drive.

By refusing to atone for her behavior, Anita G. resists any form of compromise and, thus, draws a line between herself and the judge which is to say: between herself and society. In this way, her action is a success. It provides her with an alternative to the deadlock between assimilation and annihilation. By the end of the film, Anita G., homeless and pregnant, is no longer part of society. With nowhere to go, she turns herself into the state. And yet, because she is no longer forced to conform herself to society, her removal from it affords her an aspect of freedom. Furthermore, her removal of herself from society, rather than being caught and captured by the state, is, in itself, a form of agency. By negating the state's ability to negate her, by, instead negating herself by turning herself into the state, Anita G. gains the upper hand. If Anita G. had offered the judge an explanation, she would have been conforming herself to his laws. By refusing to do so, her act remains unfathomable to the judge. As a result, she remains removed from his symbolic order and language. If she does compromise, she will find herself internally split. Part of herself will be aligned with the society she has conformed herself to, while another part will remain resistant to it. This internal split, where one part of the self is fixed on a particular concept or object and another part of the self is withdrawn into the interior of the self, is for Hegel madness.

In his articulation of madness, Hegel describes it as occurring when the subject has taken an individual merely subjective representation to be objective truth. "This state of soul mostly comes about when someone shuts himself up in his subjectivity out of dissatisfaction with actuality"<sup>17</sup> and "creating some content or other from its own resources and regarding this purely subjective item as something objective and *fixing* it in place."<sup>18</sup> Here, we can see a description of the working class subject unable or unwilling to accept capitalist society, who falls away from society back into himself. Such a falling back can result in self-negation, in, for instance, suicide, as Hegel writes "Not infrequently this state of soul gives rise to an irrepressible impulse to suicide; [...]"<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Hegel marks the act of suicide explicitly as an act of negative freedom, "The human being alone is able to abandon all things, even his own life: he can commit suicide."<sup>20</sup> A form of symbolic, if not literal suicide, the abuse of alcohol or drugs can render the user to a

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>20</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 38.



death-like state if not death, itself. In a state of extreme drunkenness or under the force of powerful drugs, one exists inside a form of death, the not (yet) dead. Fallen back into their interior universe, the subject can remain alive, though sleeping, awake though dreaming. They can survive the unsurvivable by withdrawing back into their internal night. This zombie-state, an underworld or parallel world that, though it mimics death, is not death, can be seen as a holding pattern, a placeholder, as Adorno and Horkheimer write, “Narcotic intoxication, in which the euphoric suspension of the self is expiated by deathlike sleep, is one of the oldest social transactions mediating between self-preservation and self-annihilation, an attempt by the self to survive itself.”<sup>21</sup> There is an unconscious desire to stop time and withdraw into a state of timelessness, of nothingness, though the subject may be entirely unaware of this aspect. This nothingness is the abstract self which, though a state of derangement, is, also, as we shall see, the site of possibility.

We have, then, madness as defined by Hegel, the state wherein the subject finds themselves internally split, stuck on a particularity they are unable to fit into their interior universe. And yet, at the same time, the capitalist world the working class subject finds themselves in is also a universe of madness. It is, Marx writes, a world of shape-shifters, of vampires transforming into butterflies, a phantasmagoria. And, as Massimiliano Tomba writes “[it is] a society without a body, without substance.”<sup>22</sup> A world where the worker is tethered to the machinery of their labor is a mere appendage of it. The more it reaches its limits, overtaking them, the more capitalism expands. “Here we have,” Marx writes,

“in place of the isolated machine, a mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories, and whose demonic power, at first hidden by the slow and measured motions of its gigantic members, finally bursts forth in the fast and feverish whirl of its countless working organs.”<sup>23</sup> Run by no one, capitalism, though constructed by man, mutated long ago into its own mindless machinery. Infinite, an invisible and incomprehensible structure, it is a “machine [that] is rotating on the spot.”<sup>24</sup>

In an attempt to escape the madness of capitalism, the working class subject turns away, falling back into their interior and entering madness. By turning away, the working class subject refuses to engage in capitalism, refusing to engage in (its) language. Exiting society, the subject exits language. And for Lacan this move away from society is a step in the direction of freedom, as Néstor Braunstein writes:

To enter into discourse is to engage in a link and, therefore, a loss of freedom. Madness creates an exception placing itself outside the exchange of speech, of discourses. This idea is already present for Lacan in the beginning of his teaching, when he discusses the “negative freedom of a kind of speech that has given up trying to gain recognition.”<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, as Lacan states, “The mad person is the only free human being.”<sup>26</sup> The description of the subject who “has given up trying to gain recognition” is crucial. In the case of the working class subject, when they withdraw from capitalist society, though this is a dangerous space to inhabit – due to its proximity to madness and self-annihilation – it also marks a critical moment. When the working class subject recognizes their un-freedom, this recognition, alone, creates a necessary distance. In his discussion of the plight of the slave in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel writes that it is in the moment the slave recognizes their lack of freedom that they gain the distance necessary to actualize their freedom. Indeed, it is in this moment of recognition that they become free.

Furthermore, Hegel writes, “Slavery occurs in the transition between natural human existence and the truly ethical condition, it occurs in a world where wrong is still right.”<sup>27</sup> How are we to understand this passage? It would be wrong, of course, to blame the slave for their own oppression. It is the slave owner who is to blame. And yet, a world where slavery exists is a world where, as Hegel writes, “wrong is still

<sup>21</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities*, 46–7.

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 503.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 106–7.

<sup>25</sup> Braunstein, “You Cannot Choose to Go Crazy,” 85.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 86.

right.” Such a world is one that is wrong, or *verkehrte*. It is a *Verkehrte Welt*, an upside-down, or the topsy-turvy world. In such a world, a displacement, a *Verdrängung*, or *Verrücken*, has occurred. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel introduces the term *die Verkehrte Welt*, the “topsy-turvy” or “looking glass world.” *Das Verkehrte* in English means “inverted,” “perverted,” “wrong,” and “false.” Everything that exists in the one world exists in its exact opposite in the other. In one world things are “right,” while in the other, they are “wrong”:

what is despised in the former is honored, and what in the former is honored is despised. The punishment which, according to the *law of the former*, dishonors a person and destroys him, is transformed in its *inverted world* into the pardon preserving his independent being and bringing honor to him.<sup>28</sup>

This upside down or “wrong” world is described by Marx as the bourgeois world, where its inhabitants live in the “bewitched, distorted and upside-down world.” Explaining that such a world is a world in transition – between “natural human existence” and “the truly ethical condition” – Hegel suggests that such a world is one awaiting change, the change from natural human nature to the truly ethical condition, from a world where wrong is right to one where right is right. But, in a world where the slave-owner profits from the suffering of the slave, a world where the capitalist profits off the suffering of the worker, it is clearly not the capitalist who will instigate change. Though impossible, such a world must be changed by those being exploited, the worker and the slave. And yet, if one is enslaved or oppressed, if one has no access to freedom, or none other than negative freedom, then how does one go about changing the world?

First, the world must be made a world where the worker feels at home and such a world entails a world where the worker not only understands its laws and rules, but also the laws and rules must represent and protect the worker. Such a world in which the laws and rules represent and protect the worker is one constituted by the working class. And such a world appears only when the worker and not the bourgeoisie is in charge. To imagine something different from what we have, a world in which capitalism has been uprooted and obliterated – such an idea appears impossible, even mad. And someone who believes in such a vision, one who engages in the work to bring about such a world, is one who is considered mad. This type of madness must be yet another form of madness, one distinct from the madness of the subject trapped in the whirr of capitalist oblivion and the madness of the subject who has withdrawn into their interior. There must be yet another, third, form of madness.

This is the madness of the revolutionary, of one who, without knowledge of how to bring such a world about, steps forward, regardless. Acts, despite knowing nothing. During, for example, the seventy some days of the Paris Commune when the working class took their emancipation into their own hands – with no ready-made formulae, with no assurance of success, no insurance against their own death or imprisonment – with no idea whatsoever what would come of their efforts or what might become of them. Marx writes, “The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune....They have no ready-made Utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*....They have no ideals to realize, but to set free elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the communards leapt into the unknown in what might be called a *Salto Mortale*, a somersault, a (mad) leap into the unknown. To leap into the unknown is a sure sign of madness. “This revolution can be nothing other than a somersault.”<sup>30</sup> And such a leap implies a returning to. In other words, in contrast to the withdrawal from society that the act of negative freedom suggests, a leap into the unknown must be neither a leap into the infinite night of the interior nor a leap into the infinite flow of capitalism. It must be a leap into something that is both and none, a gap that exists between, a space between that as of yet does not exist, a space that will appear only once the leap has been taken. This gap that appears, akin to the sudden appearance of the image that breaks Walter White’s state of oblivion, is awaited and yet, entirely unexpected, as Paulo Virno writes. Describing such a rupture as a miracle, Virno writes:

<sup>28</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 96.

<sup>29</sup> Marx, *MECW Vol. 22*, 335.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Engels to Marx, *MECW Vol. 39*, 191.



[...] it is an exception that is especially surprising to the one who was awaiting it. It is an anomaly so potent that it completely disorients our conceptual compass, which, however, had precisely signaled the place of its insurgence.<sup>31</sup>

Negative freedom, in itself, is not freedom for the working class subject because it does not change the structure of society. Saying yes to a society that neither represents nor protects the worker, a society that indeed oppresses the worker, is also not freedom. Freedom lies elsewhere. For the working class subject to feel at home in the world, the world must be a world made for them, which is to say: it must be a world made by them. But such a world cannot be a world separate from the one in which the working class exists in now. Any alternative world can only be a reprieve, and a reprieve, as we have already determined, is not freedom. If madness is defined by the subject's dropping back into their abstract interior, on relinquishing the prospect of engaging in discourse with capitalist society, if negative freedom is madness, and if true freedom is the ability not only to say *no* to but also to say *yes to*, then within the dialectic of these moments – madness, negativity, and affirmation – there must exist an exit, or rather, an entrance into something entirely new.

**Conflict of interest:** Author states no conflict of interest.

## References

- Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Braunstein, Nestor. "You Cannot Choose to Go Crazy." In *Lacan on Madness: Madness, Yes You Can't*, edited by Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler, 85–98. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science. The First Philosophy of Right. Heidelberg 1817-18181 with Additions from the Lectures of 1818-1819*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.
- Heidegger, Martin. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin Books, 1976.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *Marx Engels Collected Works, Volume 22*. London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1975.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *Marx Engels Collected Works, Volume 39*. London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1983.
- Menke, Christoph. "Breaking Bad: Versuch über die Befreiung." *WestEnd-Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 2 (2016), 3–23.
- Tomba, Massimiliano. *Marx's Temporalities: Historical Materialism, Volume 44*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Virno, Paolo. "Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus." In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Paulo Virno and Michael Hardt, 189–212. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

---

<sup>31</sup> Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution," 208.