



Dialectics of Determinism

Echoes of Necessity in Hobbes, Hegel, Marx and Ruda

ANDREW PENDAKIS

Andrew Pendakis, "Dialectics of Determinism: Echoes of Necessity in Hobbes, Hegel, Marx and Ruda," *Provocations* 1 (2017), pp. 27-42.

We Are All Compatibilists Now

The metaphysics of the shopper owes a secret debt to Hobbes. Like Kant, Hobbes espoused a metaphysics of freedom that was compatibilist. Unlike Kant, he was able to balance consistent scientific materialism with the requirements of freedom, not by positing the existence of a spontaneously free will, but by re-defining liberty negatively as the absence of "external impediments" to voluntary action.¹ The will, then, is determined, but an action is free if it is allowed to proceed unhindered toward its desired end. Today, nothing in the unconstrained stroll of the browser is threatened by the specter of hidden, determinist necessity. Nobody denies anymore that the body can have effects on the mind—wheat belly, I've heard, has attached to it a foggy gluten brain—just as there is no question of the existence in our midst of a science of attention—innocuously called "advertising"—characterized by the explicit goal of dissolving and subverting the will. Rousseau's claim that markets compromise freedom by substituting an infinity of new needs—he calls them "conveniences"—for the dignity of natural independence is today dismissed by neoliberals as protectionist alarmism.² Limits are for cops and popes: what does it matter where my desire originates as long as I get what I want? In the same way corporations dodge blame in the thicket of complexity—no cancer cell has its origins *per se* in Coke or Marlboro—so, too, our sense of remote control, of cause hidden at a distance, lessens in direct proportion to its vagueness.

In its time, however, philosophical mechanism was a scandal: Bramhall, for example, indignantly accused Hobbes in 1646 of dishonoring the "nature of man" and of turning humans into mere "tennis balls."³ The scandal of mechanism was not simply its usefulness to atheists, nor the shame discharged by its sudden attentiveness to (carnal) bodies. Certainly, La Mettrie's later claim that "the soul is to be found in our stomach"⁴ or his descriptions of the penis as a "singular spring"⁵ still scandalized Christians a century after Hobbes. But to understand the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates around materialism, one has to reconstruct a sensation our age has largely forgotten: full-blown horror of determinism. Excepting those parts of it that were nothing more than conservative cultural reflex, fear of determinism was in many ways the paradoxical signifier of idealism's greatest strength: it pointed directly to the seriousness with which idealism approached the presence (or absence) of an idea in the

mind of someone thinking. Even if ideas are mistakenly attributed transcendental origins or if their determination by history is openly denied, idealism nevertheless construes thought as of ultimate concern, a condition or process with openly *fatal* stakes.⁶

It should come as no surprise, then, that in an age that was politically unfree—hedged in by absolutist fiat and ecclesiastical restriction—the thought of a slavery internal to the subject, there in the quiet privacy of the soul, was for many intolerable. All the questions that emerge in the seventeenth century about the right of the subject to conscience—the right to think and believe what one wants despite the requirements of external obedience—reflect what Hegel saw as a historically unique right to subjectivity that flashes into existence, perhaps only for an extremely short time, a century or two at most, within the historical triangle produced by Luther, political absolutism, and determinist natural science. Though Hobbes was an unwitting revolutionary whose materialism laid the groundwork for Marx’s critique of religion, one can also see the ways in which the choice to install despotism deep inside the body—a determinism of the past over the present, of sensation over deliberation—could be construed by proto-democrats and parliamentarians as an apology for a despotism located *outside it*, a tyranny located above and outside the subject in the form of the tremendous potential violence of the sovereign. Under these conditions, the freedom of the will was not merely radical; it was, if only for an instant, *objectively true*. Even if our moment is replete with affirmations of affronted negative freedom—rights to do and say what one wants—what is remarkable today is how lightly the specter of a necessity located deep *within*, rather than bluntly *outside*, the will weighs on the mind of us postmoderns.

In part, this is a direct effect of how successful natural scientific “psychology” has been in displacing a Christian theology of the soul: it is a positive testament to the historical ascendancy of materialist reason. At the same time, however, it speaks to the derogation of ideas in an era that Badiou has argued reduces existence to the notion that “there is nothing outside of bodies and languages.”⁷ So entrenched is this “bio-materialism” that cosmologists have posited the simulation thesis—the idea that what we experience is not “base reality” but a programmed second-order simulation—as if it were simply another metaphysical “viewpoint” among others, an option to be considered with the same level of attention one might reserve for the difference between brands of deodorant.⁸ Much of this, of course, has to do with the way subjects experience time under the influence of what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism,” an order which is less a disciplinary cage than it is a rhythm of immanent pleasures, a circulatory system of memes and clicks without rest or end.⁹ There is a sense in which the desire for an origin, a cause, even the very idea of sufficient reason is out of step with a present characterized by a constant process of engrossing self-difference and change.

Perhaps, then, it is the case that in the era of the digital causes are nothing more than their own effects. Like slavery, the causes of our desire are in the past: shouldn’t they be left there? Actual, maddening, raw horror of necessity: *The Matrix* trilogy, far from confirming the continued healthy existence of this fear, in fact confirms its death: total, molecular determination of what passes for reality consumed as thrilling pleasure. On some level, too, there is surely even longing here: wouldn’t life indeed be better asleep in

a computer? After all, what does the ontological falseness of a dream matter if it remains imperceptible (or is perceived but displaced by the rhythm of immanent delight)? Such questions call into doubt a presupposition that has grounded philosophical common sense since Plato (to say nothing of republican political practice from Robespierre to Mao): *that humans in the last instance naturally crave truth and that there is nothing more opposed to freedom than deception*. The lightness with which we bear these questions is a symptom not of our (post-human) strength, but of a debility or forgetfulness now structurally indispensable to the smooth reproduction of things as they already are.

The weak metaphysics of late capitalist societies—their openness to a middling compatibilism—is abetted by the fact that freedom today is not strictly speaking something you “possess,” but something you simply feel. This slippage between freedom as a capacity protected by law—as a system of objective right—and freedom conceived of as an affect, an immanent bodily delight, was already fully apparent in Hobbes. Despite the obsession of Thatcher with Gladstonian independence, neoliberalism does not rest on a philosophy of freedom grounded in Descartes or Kant—in rationalist or idealist projects of autonomy—nor even in a Lockean or Jeffersonian system of natural liberties, but on the materialist, hedonic anthropology of Hobbes. The shift from Scholastic understandings of the soul to modern compatibilist materialism de-links freedom from reason and deliberation (an identity it retains in German Idealism) and transitions it into an affinity (or even isomorphism) with pleasure. Freedom, in other words, becomes little more than what Hobbes calls “felicity”: “continuall successe in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth.”¹⁰ Nothing in the threat posed to life by naked sovereignty—the specter of unchecked royal sadism—troubles for an instant a subject’s consumption of its risky peace and quiet. It is precisely this formula that today explains the impotency of whistle-blowers. There has perhaps never before been less in common between the gesture by which a despotism is revealed and the political will required to actually destroy it.

Necessity between Luther and Lenin

It is against the indifference abetted by a lazy compatibilism that Frank Ruda’s brilliant new book, *Abolishing Freedom*, argues openly for a return to liberty’s classical opposite—outright metaphysical fatalism. In a moment in which “freedom has become a signifier of oppression,” a word used to justify neoliberal dispossession, fatalism “is the only possible stance that allows us to think freedom without being indifferent.”¹¹ Ruda’s position here distantly echoes the point made by Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man* that in “advanced industrial society [...] liberty can be made a powerful instrument of domination.”¹² For Ruda, indifference is the necessary consequence of a trajectory that begins not with Hobbes, but with Aristotle (based on the claims I’ve made above it is clear that we disagree on this). The latter, he argues, confuses freedom with something that is merely possible—something that may or may not be actualized—but which nevertheless always already exists for humans in the form of a latent (natural) capacity. Freedom reduced to possibility can only take place in the shadow of the actual and therefore under the dominion of an occluded essence. Understood in such a way, freedom becomes a process hidden in an ontogeny, the expression of a merely natural or

animal function. Ruda instead chooses to align himself with a philosophy of freedom as impossible rupture that passes (jaggedly) from Marx, Lukács, and Mao through Lacan, Badiou, and Žižek. Freedom on this account cannot be strictly actualized nor granted along the lines of a positive right or law, but must happen to a subject/people in the form of a disaster or crisis. A creature that “has nothing to lose but its chains”¹³ (Marx) is in this sense the opposite of one “born free” but “everywhere in chains”¹⁴ (Rousseau): the first originates (de-ontologically) in ruination, the latter (ontologically) in an origin spoiled by history. Freedom disrupts a comfort, having more to do with Hegel’s “way of despair” than the convenience and peace of Condorcet’s Enlightenment happiness.¹⁵

Of course, there is a paradox here. Although Ruda’s work begins with a hostility to indifference (to freedom), it is precisely the fatalist who has been historically charged with desiccating the passions (and, in the process, freedom itself). If the present is already simultaneously past and future, fated and finished, of what use to humans are the senses, the luxury of a body? Why exist, hope, feel, think or struggle at all? Fatalism, on this account, substitutes sleep for sensitivity. This is precisely the allegation made, for example, against the Stoics by Hegel: “whether on the throne or in chains, in the utter dependence of its individual existence” the Stoic cultivates a “lifeless indifference that steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence.”¹⁶ Spinoza—the philosopher most often associated with determinist necessity (and a kind of neo-Stoic conception of liberty as detached self-rule)—was, of course, framed by contemporaries as a great destroyer of freedom and as the architect of a philosophy of nature which left no room for surprises, invention or wonder. In the history of Western philosophy openly fatalist systems, however, are relatively rare. Instead, fatalism—like skepticism—hovers over the tradition as a name reserved for the position of an enemy. Fatalists are almost always others, imprecise threats that are at the same time foils for the construction of a philosophical alternative.¹⁷

Ruda’s fatalism is particularly hard to pin down because the thinkers it shares the most with—Spinoza, Voltaire, Nietzsche, Blanqui, Benjamin, Bataille, Lenin—go almost completely unmentioned in the text. This feels more like strategy than oversight: one senses that much of the strangeness of the book, as well as the originality of its treatment, would be lost with a too-clearly exposed foundation. This strangeness is intensified by the figures he chooses to construct his project through. Though Luther, Diderot, and Freud (with an ambient De Sade) are fairly obvious points of departure for a re-purposed fatalism, Kant and Hegel are not. If German Idealism owes debts to the Enlightenment—refusing to openly reject the usefulness or explanatory power of modern rationalist science—it breaks with the latter precisely in so far as its logics—epistemological empiricism, mechanist physics, psychological associationism—build toward a picture of the human as little more than a finite, amoral, or meaningless natural animal. To transform Kant or Hegel into fatalists, then, one first has to disrupt the traditional association of their work with seemingly opposed investments in self-determination, autonomy and freedom.

Complicating matters significantly, Ruda constructs his argument outside the terrain of the debates usually associated with fatalist reason—debates, in turn, that are often linked to the adjacent but isomorphic problem of scientific determinism. Bramhall and

Hobbes, then, or Mendelssohn and Jacobi are nowhere to be found here. Rather than moving predictably along the tension separating determinism from freedom—a tension, of course, traditionally established between science and metaphysics, reason and faith—he chooses to playfully install his fatalism one-sidedly in pure metaphysics. This “pure” (1) or “transcendental fatalism” (the latter is Klossowski’s term) functions at the same instant as a dark “counterhistory” (9-10) of God. One might even say, for better or for worse, that Ruda has produced a fully executed fatalist theology. From Hegel’s God who perversely knows that he doesn’t exist to Luther’s who excretes the human out of his anus like a “piece of shit,” the Gods found by Ruda are cruel, unconscious, or dead (38). These Gods—all of which, like Russian dolls, contain a tiny homunculus of Žižek/Badiou—provide the staging ground for a conception of freedom as rational, “revolutionary” struggle: freedom can take place only within necessity, within the alterity and exigency of the object, never as the extension of a personal separateness or election imagined as natural to subjects. The point in the end is to establish that rationalism is fatalist and that there has never been a consistent rationalism that was not at the same time a struggling fatalism. No freedom without fatalism, no fatalism without reason.

Adding to the compellingly unfamiliar quality of the text—the sense one gets that it is appearing out of nowhere—is the radical distance maintained between its object and anything like a recognizable politics or history. Both remain oddly offstage, alluded to from time to time, but never squarely faced. *Abolishing Freedom* has little to say about the nature of the “abolition” envisioned by its title, nor about the complexion of the political movements that stand to be strengthened by an apology for fatalism. Aside from an extremely brief sketch of the present—one in which we are told that freedom has become a means to retrench “social protection”—no clues are given as to just what it is about the specificity of our conjuncture that urgently requires the fatalist stance (1). Though there are occasional nods to Marx, Lenin, and Mao, we are expected to intuit the politics of Ruda’s position almost entirely on the basis of his proximity to Žižek and Badiou. On the traditional Marxist association of fatalism (and of metaphysics more generally) with bad religion and quietism, the text remains curiously silent. Lenin, for example, goes out of his way to defend historical materialism and the critique of indeterminism from its association with outright fatalism and is generally framed by scholars as a revolutionary voluntarist.¹⁸ After all, it is precisely by attributing to Marxism a pathological fatalism—something it can never itself quite see, but which determines its desire all the way down—that enemies to the Left and Right came to entrench culturally the equation of revolution with stupidity and blindness.

The cost of the proximity of Marxism to a concept of historical destiny or fate was its inscription as doubly hyper- and hypo-rational. It was hyper-rational insofar as it came to be seen as the subordination of things to ideas. On this account, Marxism is a fatalism of theory characterized by the tendency to deprive life of its plurality and richness, all of its naturally-occurring passionate attachments and interests. Marxist theory does not simply secularize destiny on the level of content (replacing predestination by God with determination by an economy), it is itself—formally, there in the mind of the believer—a mechanism of blind fate. Marxism, then, comes to be re-framed as mesmerism, as a kind of rationalist spell, the intensity of which is directly proportional to the

absoluteness of its truth-claims: it is precisely the scale of its truth, its ontological *weight*, that threatens the “tolerant” perspectivism of the liberal state. We need to remember that at least since Locke an iron rule has regulated relations between order and truth. According to this rule—one intensified in the wake of Neo-Kantianism—metaphysics is identified with (fatalist) “enthusiasm” and epistemological circumspection with political slowness and tolerance.¹⁹ From here, it is only a short step—one taken by both Burke and Hegel—to an idea of one-sided abstraction as itself *actually* fatal, a revolutionism without measure or limit.

A perceived fatalism was also at the root of a *hypo*-rational tendency alleged to exist at the very heart of communist practice and thought. Marxism, on this account, came to be seen as atavistically tribal, a kind of blood-feud or a raiding party grounded in the petty economies of revenge. Fate is here the pull of a subterranean taste for the flesh of the rich: in line with the classical image of politics as cycle or circle—a necessary oscillation through aristocracy, democracy, and tyranny—communism haunts history as the constant, yet futile dream of the eternally poor. Marxism is no longer science, but death-drive, a dark necessity outside (or even *constitutive*) of history.

What matters, then, about the Leninist critique of fatalism is the gap it produces in the capacity of enemies to link Marxism to unconsciousness: suddenly, revolution is allowed to appear as a science of the particular, an art of the conjuncture, that is never decided in advance and which takes place somewhere between the strength of (the fidelity of) its militants and the hard, inscrutable contingencies of history. Lenin, in such moments is fighting two battles at once: one against Marxism construed as primitivism, the other as Marxism mis-recognized as blind futurism. In this instance, trains moving backwards and forwards lead to the same place: the nowhere of eternity. It is precisely this nowhere that Leninist theory and practice seeks to avoid.

Ruda’s theological method and bracketed political commitments at times mesh uncomfortably. His use of Luther is here exemplary. Effectively, Luther is to Ruda what St. Paul is to Badiou: a figure of rebellious truth, someone who re-imagines freedom as a kind of despairing impossibility, a break with what happens to be the case. Linked to a philosophy of rupture and change, Luther, on this account, is a “proto-Leninist” (and, on the same page, a “proto-Maoist” [25]). To my mind, this conclusion far too quickly glosses over everything we know about Luther: that he was always the accomplice of princes and never the poor. Luther, of course, famously acknowledges the right of protestants to resist Catholic violence, but rejects outright armed revolt against an established state: “I am and always will be on the side of those against whom insurrection is directed, no matter how unjust their cause; I am opposed to those who rise in insurrection, no matter how just their cause”.²⁰ At other moments, Luther suggests that it is possible to passively disobey, but not to openly revolt: the punishment that awaits the persecuted Christian, the power exerted on its body and property, is in this case a blessing, the pleasure of a chance to suffer in the name of Christ. The spectacle of Luther’s resistance to the universality of Catholicism only hides his complicity with the secularized universality that would come to be laid down by the Peace of Augsburg and later institutionalized at the Treaty of Westphalia: the nihilism of obedience to (territorially sovereign) princes. Though Ruda frames Erasmus vis-à-vis

Luther as a “moderate bourgeois politician,” it was precisely Luther who, viewed from the angle of someone like Thomas Müntzer, was a figure of moderation and appeasement (26). After all, while Müntzer was riskily organizing armed peasant revolt, Luther was busy writing a pamphlet entitled “Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants.”

From Dark Marxism to Communist *Sittlichkeit*

Fatalism in general, like ontology or religion, does not enter the world under the sign of its own necessary political destiny. Everything depends on the locality of usage: the politics of a theory are as much the effect of their own internal limits and commitments as they are those of the practice into which they fall either through capture or through chance. Just as there has never been an enemy unambiguously called “metaphysics”—a transcendentalism that once deconstructed would magically emit better politics—fatalism cannot *tout court* be dismissed as the whip of priests and masters.

Certainly, what we might call Dogmatic Fatalism has been the *de facto* unconscious of transcendental conservatism and the dominant “spiritual aroma” of hierarchical political systems grounded in mythical authority.²¹ Adorno and Horkheimer often point to the limits of a thought bound to an overarching logic of pure repetition. Serfdom, from their perspective, is the political genre proper to indeterminate eternity, to a cosmic or sovereign fate that reduces the potentialities of collective life to work, obedience, and death. Absolutism, after all, was always a species of fatalism even when it rested on the putatively “free” submission of the subject-child to the loving paternalism of the Father-King. James I envisioned his rule as the fruit of irrevocable fiat, a product of transcendental right, while the political authority of a figure like Louis XIV—articulated on the level of fashion or in the architectural logic of Versailles—works on the basis of an ancient solar necessity. The practice of 凌迟 (*língchí*) or slow slicing—used by emperors to punish would be regicides or traitors—attempts to transform a body into a kind of blistering eternity: its goal is to transfer into the flesh a knowledge of its objective powerlessness in the order of things and to slow time to a point where it becomes a continuum of pure pain, sameness itself. Necessity, in these contexts, expresses itself historically as a passivity that borders on inexistence.

Perceived from within this tradition (and against the grain of his caveats), three of Ruda’s fatalist slogans—“Act as if you did not exist!”, “Act as if you were dead!”, “Act as if you were an inexistent woman!”—will strike an oddly familiar and re-assuring chord: they are, after all, extremely close in letter (but not in spirit) to the injunctions made by Christians and Emperors to ontological meekness and finitude! “Fatalism” argues Fanon, “grovels in front of the colonist” and “accepts the devastation decreed by God.”²² Life as always already dead, an empty festival of suffering, misrecognition, and sameness: these are Augustinian tropes that continue to haunt even a thinker as anti-Christian as Lacan. In the same way that the consistency of Hobbes’s atheism is undercut by a picture of nature as terrestrial hell—a nightmare of vanity and violence—so too does Ruda risk dissolving the human in an undialectical acid bath of pure misery. Choose death, not life: though Ruda is careful to fence-off his position from Christianity (or Platonism for that matter) via detours through dark materialists like Klossowski and

De Sade, it is not clear that he avoids the trap set by heaven's polar opposite, a trap Adorno once called "death metaphysics," and which he linked explicitly to Heidegger's necrophilic mysticism.²³ Which is only to say that shit squared is actually pure light: a soap as old as heaven.

What then is the status of the slave in Ruda's text? Slavery, of course, was a practical fatalism grounded in racist biology or in the ostensible right to rule of a naturally "superior" element (a principle transformed by Aristotle into a constituent logic of the universe itself). Though for Ruda it is with Aristotle that the indeterminist tradition he is critiquing begins—Aristotle indeed construes freedom as a capacity and in this sense initiates both the Scholastic tradition of free will thinking as well as its later liberal or natural right variants—it is also the case that Aristotelian aristocratism refuses to distribute this capacity equally. Even if on the level of the species all human beings in Aristotle have a generic capacity to be "free"—free, in this sense, really means rational and self-ruled, not undetermined—there are bodies which seem to foreclose this capacity and become something entirely other, located on the outer fringes of recognizable humanity. In other words, there are humans so close to their bodies and so far from the ideal of Aristotle's God—a God made out of pure contemplation—that they are slaves by nature. It matters, then, that the tradition of free-will liberalism that Ruda is implicitly rejecting via Aristotle found in the latter not a philosopher of freedom, but an open apologist for natural slavery.

One perhaps unintended consequence of abolishing indeterminist reason, then, is the way such a gesture simultaneously disqualifies the claim of the slave to have been enslaved in the first place! If there is no freedom, as Ruda suggests vis-à-vis Erasmus, "there is no simple compulsion either" (29). In the sequel on fatalist politics I'd like to see next written by Ruda—and such a book is begging to be written—I'd want to see how his position can be turned against freedom without abolishing along with it the historical reality and suffering of the slave. In ontologizing slavery, is it possible that we lose the specificity and precise social suffering of actual enslaved peoples, to say nothing of the intelligence and courage they have constantly displayed in the face of catastrophic odds? Does the comic fatalism proposed by Ruda transform the historical experience of slavery into a variation on false consciousness (or worse, into another turn of the screw of comic human error and stupidity)?

It is precisely against the Dogmatic Fatalism of eternal cycles and essences—as well as the eschatology of the Christian tradition—that the great aristocratic and middle class rationalisms of the eighteenth century were consolidated. It is here really that we have to search for the origins of Ruda's (dark) Enlightenment fatalism. A figure like Voltaire, for example, rejects not fatalism proper, but a variant he links to the naïve historical optimism of Leibniz. It is not really the idea that "things could not be otherwise"²⁴ than they are that bothers Voltaire—the position, of course, famously articulated by Pangloss—but the fact that necessity has been deceptively transformed (by Leibniz) into "the most perfect state possible," presided over by "the most perfect of monarchs."²⁵ History and nature, on these terms, become closed circles in which "having been made for a purpose [...] everything is necessarily for the *best* purpose."²⁶ To evade the grip of final causality, Voltaire adopts a consistent natural scientific determinism that requires

that he simultaneously dispense entirely with freedom of the will. Like Hobbes, he insists that “liberty is nothing but the ability to do what I want.”²⁷

But if the goal of Voltaire’s determinism is to ground mind in body, to materialize thought by placing it back into the necessity of Nature, he is at the same time working hard to ground bodies themselves in the second-order pinball of History. Candide’s body is silly putty: it is laughably *objective*. In an order ruled by capricious force—by roaming kings and armies—Bramhall’s human tennis ball is not metaphysics, but sociological fact. Bodies are the butts of jokes not simply because cancer happens behind our backs, but because to be a body, *to be any body*, is always at the same instant to be the constantly bobbed plaything of history. For Voltaire, however, nothing in the fact that we are victims of destiny in the domain of nature requires that we maintain this arrangement on the terrain of politics. As natural beings, we are bound by laws beyond our control; as political beings, it is precisely our capacity to be bound by law that frees us from capricious sovereignty. Voltaire uses the debacle of Candide to turn scholastic freedom against itself, showing the ways in which a freedom imagined as passively internal to bodies leaves open the possibility of the worst forms of historical enslavement and abuse. It is because Voltaire doesn’t believe in freedom as a naturally occurring element of human bodies that he can insist that liberty is something that originates on the outside of a body, a property of collective, positive political orders and systems. Freedom is not, on this account, reducible to a matter of subjectivity. Whether it is the Hobbesian identification of freedom with doing what one wants or the (seemingly opposed) Badiouian understanding of freedom as a break in what happens to be the case, both paradoxically find common ground in failing to locate freedom proper in positive institutional order. Ruda draws from Voltaire his determinist pessimism as well as the latter’s dark materialist vision of history—a veil of blunder, error, and sadistic violence—but doesn’t leaven this position with Voltaire’s own very explicit Enlightenment commitments to freedom conceived as positive political order. It is this commitment to a conception of freedom as positive order that I see as proper to, rather than contested by, the Marxist tradition. In this sense, Marxism extends liberalism into a broader domain of effectivity and inclusiveness, rather than replacing it with an entirely new political ontology. I’ll return to this point below.

Ruda’s fatalism distinguishes itself immediately from those grounded in an ontology of the Good (or Best) by openly assuming a provocatively flipped stance: his fatalism is sunk instead in pure metaphysical Badness, an ontology of comic ruin, one he calls, simply enough, “the worst” (8). He rejects from the beginning the Platonic picture of Being as secured, in the last instance, by its Goodness; just as he discards the Christian philosophy of history, which transforms the necessity and internal fitness of the Platonic Idea into a form of time curved to arrive inevitably at justice. The Worst is employed, then, as a fairly obvious reversal of Leibniz: fate ceases to operate as the plaything of an architect God—creationist, benevolent, capable of deliberation and choice—and is allowed to intersect ontologically with the whole of nature and history. At the same instant, the move to the Worst allows Ruda to protect necessity from naïve Enlightenment, that habit—perhaps best expressed in Condorcet and D’Holbach (but even Second International Marxism)—of conveniently discovering in God’s dead body—

naked, immanent nature—a system of necessary moral (or political) truths that reveal themselves in lock-step with the progress of skeptical science.

It would be easy to confuse Ruda's philosophy of the Worst—its tropes of error and comic ruin, its taste for the abject—with what Bataille once called “base materialism,” a stance grounded in the carnal Real of bodies, or in (non)-ontologies of chaos, absence, or catastrophe. Such philosophies exist to effectively humiliate Enlightenment, to shame, trim, or limit the claims of the human to a distinctness based in the generic capacity to reason. Ruda's fatalism, however, is rigorously and unapologetically rationalist, sharing with Lacan a commitment to reason shorn of optimism and of the traditional equation—found in Locke or Hume, for example—linking truth and science to comfort, peace, and morality. A gaze directed to rather than averted from disaster is not only consistent with Enlightenment, but the latter's very condition, the means by which it separates science from faith and freedom from the stupors of organic necessity.

Certainly, there is an angle from which Ruda's metaphysics comes to appear as little more than pure tactical hyperbole, a kind of prank or gargoye crafted to scare awake the consciousness put to sleep by (capitalist) convenience and speed. This is no slight: the best pranks are magisterial! At the same time, however, there is more to Ruda's position than strategic fright. Ruda uses the abominable to intensify fear to a point of involution. If ruin is inescapable, if all roads lead to singular failure, if the worst is as implacably ahead as it is incontrovertibly behind, there is paradoxically nothing to fear. Like Spinoza, he links the see-saw of fear and hope to an unthinkingly commonsensical relation to things. Empiricist cheerfulness is possible only on the condition that it covers over a deeper, structuring indifference. One might say, then, that Ruda darkens the lights not with a view to the construction of atmosphere—fear as an end in itself—but with the hope of ending fear of darkness altogether. This is the opposite of the use made by skepticism of the comically repetitive human clown: in Montaigne, it is the purposeless “hustle and bustle of the world,” the comically universal provincialism of human beings that leads him to conclude that there is always less to be gained (and more to be risked) in changing a law than in simply leaving it alone.²⁸ Cosmic insignificance comes to function as an alibi for complete submission: “it is the universal law of laws that every man should obey those of the place he is in.”²⁹

A similar structure haunts the realisms derived from Machiavelli and Hobbes. The ceaseless competitiveness of humans, a certain fatalism of the instincts, is the excuse used to call into existence the need for a “mortal God,” the God on earth of the sovereign or the prince. Hobbes makes excruciatingly clear the link between a human reduced generically to its capacity to be killed (and kill) and the political logics of absolutism: the price of allowing ourselves to be conceived as self-preserving algorithms of worry is a life that is mere existence, a life that aspires to no more than craven safety. For such a life—to paraphrase Rousseau—there is no contradiction between the pleasures of tranquility and the harsh reality of a dungeon. Ruda, like Badiou and Žižek, rejects this political horizon. “Act in such a way that you accept the struggle you cannot flee from!”: universal tragic-comedy is not a pretext for passivity or resignation. It is an open, struggling revolt (97). Though it is sometimes hard to see it, this is the precise sense in which Ruda's project—like Blanqui's—is a philosophy of the barricade. Its goal is to replace the

quibbling child of rights with an atheist God of war, a militant without hope or fear. The child of rights waits for freedom to be dispensed from a good adulthood located above and beyond it. The fatalist, however, doesn't ask or wait. The fatalist outright takes.

There are no good ontological reasons to reject Ruda's fatalism. On some level, the picture it draws of (in)existence is incontrovertible. "There is no there is" (171): what really can be said against the clear-sighted materialist nothingness of such a proposition? Attempts to contest this nothing (less than nothing) can only ever appear from the outside as residual idealism. Musty-curtained drawing room, the desperation of the bunker: these are the necessary forms of appearance taken by an attack on true materialist nothingness. But if there are no good ontological reasons to reject a metaphysics of the nothing, there are nevertheless many good political reasons for doing so. This is because ontology is never *tout court* a form of politics and because politics has no obligation to simply mirror or reflect what exists. From a purely optical or strategic perspective then, that is, from a perspective invested in generating a new form of political life, fatalism can only appear like the prerogative of the few and never the passionate attachment of the many.

To work through why this is the case, we need to return to Hegel and Marx. I must admit that the Hegel described in Žižek, Ruda, and others, is not one I immediately recognize. Though these readings are fascinating and have rightly laid the foundation for a renewed interest in Hegel, they tend to transform him into a one-sided philosopher of negation, a thinker of discontinuous breaks and gaps. The dialectic, on this account, augurs a dark materialism, the dominant subjective ground-tone of which is "dissolution and dismemberment" (107). Hegelianism brings us to a place where "reason cannot escape the conclusion that there is nothing to cling to" (125). There is no denying that this is a precious and unsubtractable aspect of Hegel's project. But the identification of Hegel with a philosophy of split and rupture is no better than a Hegel lost to caricatures of reconciliation and totality. This is because Hegel's philosophy, in the last instance, stakes out the territory for the construction of an everyday peace and quiet, a kind of animal sweetness, that at the same instant never ceases to be philosophical, self-different, and dialectically engaged. The ever-discussed "identity of identity and non-identity," then, is not simply a rendering of speculative logic, but a direct image of the subject under conditions of ideal *Sittlichkeit*. Absolute Knowing does not remain torn apart on a Nietzschean summit. It descends back down to the domain of what Nietzsche himself once called "average man."³⁰ As Hegel has it:

From its very beginning, culture must leave room for the earnestness of life in its concrete richness; this leads the way to an experience of the real issue. And even when the real issue has been penetrated to its depths by serious speculative effort, this kind of knowing and judging will still retain its appropriate place in ordinary conversation.³¹

Hegel is clear that the circle of philosophy returns through Absolute Knowing to simple immediacy, a "self-conscious freedom at peace with itself" that at the same instant "has not set the antitheses on one side and left it lying there."³² This is nothing like the claims made by critics according to which Hegel is no more than an apologist for Prussian

absolutism. Far from it, Hegel here lays down the delicate inner workings of a speculative communist *Sittlichkeit*, one that would champion animal pleasure, comfort and peace—the entire ramifying sweetness of the ordinary—without submerging the latter in unthinking dogma, thoughtlessness, or consensus. Though Hegel’s views on marriage and the family are conservative, what is missed in a too-quick dismissal of their role in his system is that they are there at all, that he has seen fit to include in his politics a place for substance, feeling, and civil tranquility.

What is often completely missed in the usual stories told about the transition from Hegel to Marx is how close in spirit Marx remains to the position articulated above. After all, it is precisely peace, reconciliation, and safety that Marxism constantly troubles in the name of politicized division. Marxism, certainly, is a philosophy of war: it longs for, rather than avoids, a volatilized Two. It obviously differs in this sense from every attempt to diffuse social tensions in natural or cosmic oneness. But Marxism is misunderstood if struggle is conceptualized as an end and not a means. Revolution exists within the Marxist tradition to superannuate the need for revolutions. Terry Eagleton precisely captures this point when he argues that “Marxists want nothing more than to stop being Marxists.”³³ Neither a process to be perpetually sustained, nor a form of life with its own unique pleasures and habits, Marxism takes as its objective its own abolition. It is not, in this sense, a philosophy of struggle, but a process aimed (like Kant’s) at universal (and even “final”) peace. The latter, of course, is not a naïve or tranquilized passivity, a peace that “passeth all understanding.”³⁴ It is not an essence at home in itself. Rather, it is a state of affairs in which the beauty of a sunset would no longer function as an alibi for global stupidity and suffering.

Marxism, in other words, is an anti-sadism. The entire horizon of Marx’s work begins at the refusal that life is exhausted by suffering, pain, and meaninglessness. This is not at all to say that Marxism is a philosophy of meaning. Despite the claims of its critics, Marxism is not a religion dressed up as politics. Far from it. Nothing can cure the fact that humans lack an *ergon* or that they exist in a cosmos they will never completely understand. But Marxism still struggles toward a fragile horizon of happiness, a certain diffuse sweetness of life. This sweetness is immediately intelligible to workers and peasants and consistently mocked by intellectuals for whom it is no more than a cipher for the falseness of heaven.

Some on the Left will remain unconvinced that a critique of freedom grounded in dark metaphysics improves politically (or even philosophically) on a dialectical materialism for which freedom and necessity were never opposites in the first place. As early as 1921, Lukács wrote that “Fatalism and voluntarism are only mutually contradictory to an undialectical and un-historical mind.”³⁵ One is tempted to ask, then: why fatalism and not simply (negative) dialectics? Why project onto the corpse of a dead or sadist God a determinism the black comedy of which is always already better expressed by the history of capitalism itself? “Act as if one was already dead” is one of the key axioms in Ruda’s provisional fatalist morality: isn’t this, however, already a major part of the depressive infrastructure of “communicative capitalism,” an era in which *The Walking Dead* is as much an image of the future—of capitalist collapse, breakdown, etc.—as it is a present characterized by Hobbesian competition and precarity? After all, there are whole zones

in today's un-developing cities in which the staggering of the zombie is *de rigueur*. What does an enjoinder to "act dead" add to the stagger of the addict or the prostrate abjection of someone so depressed they can't get out of bed? What does Ruda's fatalism add politically to old-fashioned Leninist courage?

On Abolition

Abolition is not just an intensified rejection, nor is it the brute destruction of something merely loathed. To abolish is to liquidate *politically*: it is negation passed through the medium of law or collective struggle, an act of the state (or a revolting "people") that aims to comprehensively withdraw from circulation a toxic form or practice. Abolition is not a tweaked legal postulate, an act open to reversal by a future sovereign: it proudly envisions itself (perhaps even undialectically) as *forever*. The classic political imaginary of abolition is that of a negation undertaken in the name of an entirely new socius: no revolution, in other words, without the accompanying smash of things ended once and for all. Despite its title, Ruda's book has little to say about abolition understood in this properly political sense.

In 1810, Miguel Hidalgo, a revolutionary priest opposed to aspects of the colonial system in Mexico, abolished slavery. This declaration took place outside of state power at the head of an actually existing "real movement."³⁶ "This order equally is now imposed upon all," he declared, that "no one shall herewith purchase slaves"; those who refuse will "suffer without excuse the death penalty and the confiscation of [their] properties."³⁷ The grandeur of such a statement takes place because the worst is not everything. It is not there at the origin of things. Nor is it necessarily ahead in the form of an unavoidable apocalypse. The worst isn't everything, even if nothing is left untouched by it. A cigarette smoked in front of a library is an infinitesimal joy. Walking, too. Philosophy. Sex. Coffee. All of these are moments within, but outside the worst, mundane joys the protection of which is the true end of any genuinely radical politics. Politics is in this sense the paradox of a being willing to sacrifice everything—happiness, comfort, peace—for the just socialization of precisely happiness, comfort, and peace. "None of the abstract concepts," wrote Adorno, "comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace."³⁸ Freedom, then, is not a capacity secured from within by essence, nor is it a rupture or break with things as they are; rather, freedom is a tiny pleasure, or rather the name for the positive system in which the latter might finally be properly distributed and protected. Communism, in this sense, would be a society that no longer pits the distribution of tiny pleasures against the existence of the planet or the generic capacity of humans to think, doubt, plan, hope, and organize. It would be a society, in other words, in which having and dispossession were finally opposites. Politics fights to abolish the worst, to actively forestall it, and to redeem—naively, in a sense precisely understood by Benjamin and Adorno—everything lost to history by inertia and violence. Politics hopes not for the best, but rather a *chance*.

The above critiques, however, are (in part) misplaced because they expect of Ruda's book a form of expression preempted from the very beginning by its choice of genre. *Abolishing Freedom* is not really a work of "theory," if the latter is understood in the sense specified by Adorno as a science of the gap or difference between philosophy and

history, metaphysics, and sociology. Instead, this is philosophy, and philosophy undertaken at the highest possible level of rigor and care. It may be that we can speak of a stamina or athleticism proper to philosophy, a power to remain within the conditions laid down by its terms that it would share with pure math (or 12 tone music). As theory *Abolishing Freedom* fails to historicize its concepts, to place them in the context of the present in any sustained or precise way (the *sine qua non* of all “dialectical criticism”) and shies away from thinking through comprehensively the political ramifications of its arguments. As creative metaphysics, however, *Abolishing Freedom* is high art. Ruda’s work in this regard belongs to a new cohort of bravado gestures within philosophy—one thinks here of Meillasoux’s *After Finitude*, Markus Gabriel’s, *Why the World Does not Exist*, or Catherine Malabou’s *The Future of Hegel*—that gain their incredible inner consistency and rigor at the expense of something like a structuring dialectical debility or weakness. Like a body that expands the range of an ear by depriving its eyes of sight, these texts shed dialectical sensitivity—a certain openness to being interrupted and to the limits of their own position—at precisely the same speed as they gain inner coherence and scale. This is as it should be. Dialecticians are drawn to the edges of such works like rats or street dogs: the holes they open on the margins let things in and out. There is something frustrating in their (our) hunger, this restless quibbling of the negative, but also something necessary and beautiful, a kind of insistent political solidarity or hope. Dialectical criticism chases into view the obscured political limits and fantasies of a stance: it forces politics onto systems that would prefer not to (or are busy, sometimes usefully, looking elsewhere). Dialectics, then, pokes and jabs not in the manner of the button-pusher, but with a view to the specificity of a reconnoiter.

So close, however, is our moment to complete insentience that one is also tempted to add that *wherever* there is consistent thought—whether in religion or Hip Hop, metaphysics or math—there is still a chance, no matter how stalled or inverted its form, for the prospect of an end to capitalism. The moment these tiny enclaves of consistent value vanish so too does any chance for the rational negation of capital (that is, an end that isn’t simply brute accidental extinction or the nihilist wait of accelerationism). *Abolishing Freedom*, whatever its own resistance to a rhetoric of hope, is just such an enclave.

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 146.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 48.

³ John Bramhall, *The Works of John Bramhall* (Oxford: John Henry Parker), 63.

⁴ La Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, ed. Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8.

⁵ La Mettrie, *Machine Man*, 28.

⁶ For Plato, the presence in the soul of the idea of the Good is itself the sufficient condition of virtuous action; without a correct definition of justice there is no limit to how fully a life might descend into suffering or tyranny. For both Kant and Hegel, events occurring in the brain are the difference between two radically distinct forms of existence: one cannot, in either thinker’s system, be unwittingly free. In other words, the

appearance in a mind of the idea of freedom is not a fleeting chemical glint, but a happening or event. Ideas, on this account, are not mere epiphenomena of the empiricist body, traces that flash up on the inside of consciousness (like shadows on the inner wall of a cave) only to instantly vanish: rather, ideas are states of emergency, matters of life and death. Against the weak representationalism of the empiricist, and despite the latter's claim to a certain materialism, idealists grant to thought a hammer-like concreteness and force.

⁷ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 1.

⁸ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 2.

⁹ Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London: Verso, 2016), 33.

¹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 46.

¹¹ Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), ix–xi. All further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

¹² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 2003), 9.

¹³ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, 32; http://www.history.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/courses/documents/%5Brealname%5D/marx_and_engels_communist_manifesto.pdf (accessed July, 2017).

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Late Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 41.

¹⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 49.

¹⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 121.

¹⁷ It is for this reason that fatalism comes to be identified by the modern Western tradition as congenitally “oriental” or confined to a “China” internal to its own past (a sublated age of despotism, historical motionlessness, etc.) Too-quick readings of badly translated Confucian classics—readings which saw in the notion of 天 (tian) a monochromatic theist “fate”—were enough to establish the fiction of a specifically “Chinese fatalism” despite the fact that it was precisely a variation on this concept—天命 tianming, “the mandate of heaven”—that authorized the right to resist an unjust sovereign (an option, we should recall, traditionally rejected by apologists for absolutism in the West). Though Nietzsche breaks with the modern rationalist critique of fate—translating necessity into the will to power required to become what one is—it is interesting that alongside a vaguely orientalized eternal return—Egypt? Zarathustra?—he can posit a specifically “Russian Fatalism”—one connected to the logic of the “fakir”—in which the soldier, defeated, “lies down in the snow” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Duncan Large [Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2007], 14).

¹⁸ Lenin's is, of course, a paradoxical voluntarism, one that tends to locate freedom in collective historical praxis rather than unbound, personal free-will. See James J. O'Rourke, *The Problem of Freedom in Marxist Thought: An Analysis of the Treatment* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974), 70.

¹⁹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: T. Tegg and Son, 1836), 536.

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 45: *Christian In Society II*, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 62.

-
- ²¹ Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 250.
- ²² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 18.
- ²³ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2004), 369.
- ²⁴ Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14.
- ²⁵ G. W. Leibniz, in Anthony Savile, *Leibniz and the Monadology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 238.
- ²⁶ Savile, *Leibniz and the Monadology*, 4.
- ²⁷ Voltaire, *A Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. John Fletcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 174.
- ²⁸ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 174.
- ²⁹ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 86.
- ³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 27.
- ³¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 3.
- ³² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 12.
- ³³ Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 1.
- ³⁴ Philippians 4:7, King James Version.
- ³⁵ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 4.
- ³⁶ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 57.
- ³⁷ Miguel Hidalgo, *Edict Against Slavery*; <http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/hidalgoarchive.htm#slavery> (accessed July, 2017).
- ³⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2002), 157.