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Splijtstof

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Redactie

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De illustraties in deze editie en op de cover komen van de hand van beeldredacteur Dennis Hamer.

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Redactioneel

Waarde lezer,

Sinds 1972 heeft u kunnen genieten en gruwelen van Splijststof-uitwerpselen. Soms lange, soms korte maar immer Splijtende stof heeft u goedkeurend knikkend, zeurend zuchtend, gehaast, grinnikend en soms verbaasd onder ogen gehad. Begonnen als ‘maandblad van de filosofenbond’ heeft Splijststof verschillende transities doorgeemaakt. Nieuwe redactieleden, nieuwe plannen, nieuwe voorkeuren, nieuwe ideeën. Wat maakt Splijststof eigenlijk nog Splijststof? Ook op de redactie komt dit onderwerp wel eens ter sprake. Het is u misschien opgevallen dat de omslag van deze Splijststof anders is dan anders. Het plotseling onderaan plaatsen van het logo werd niet door iedereen gewaardeerd (lees: door ondergetekende), maar het argument ‘zo is het altijd geweest’ bleek door voor- *en* tegenstanders gebruikt te kunnen worden.

Nu moet u weten dat de vormgeving van de Splijststofuitgave die u nu in handen heeft een *hommage* is aan een oudere uitgave uit het jaar 1999; jaargang 28, nummer één en twee tezamen. Bij elkaar vormden nummer één en twee een prachtig dik en communistisch-rood bundeltje. Zie onderstaande illustratie: stammend uit een tijd waarin Splijststof nog voor twee gulden vijftig verkrijgbaar was en kopij op diskette kon worden aangeleverd. Aangezien Splijststof in vol kleurornaat voorlopig nog toekomstmuziek is, moet u het rood er zelf even bij fantaseren. Een frisse duik in het archief brengt al snel meer oude uitgaven boven water. Wat blijkt? Het Splijststoflogo heeft vele reizen gemaakt langs alle uithoeken van een continu van formaat veranderende oppervlakte die wij nu de Splijststofomslag noemen. De ‘continuïteit’ die ondergetekende graag wilde bewaren blijkt een illusie. In Het gerenoveerde schip van Theseus lijkt ten minste nog op het origineel. De Splijststofuitgave in uw hand daarentegen lijkt in de verste verte niet op die eerste uitgave uit 1972.

Splijststof is altijd een bonte bundel van percepties geweest. Op de vraag: ‘hoe ziet *de* Splijststof eruit’, is dan ook geen eenduidig antwoord. Moeten we continuïteit dan maar helemaal loslaten? De introductie op de uitgave uit 1999 begint als volgt: ‘Als de deuren en ramen weer gesloten worden en de geluiden van het leven van alledag de straten verlaten, dan is het weer winter geworden.’ Ah, continuïteit *at last*. Dat het elk jaar weer winter wordt, dat is toch iets waar we vanuit mogen gaan? Helaas, het IPCC laat zien dat wij *tipping point* na *tipping point* voorbij stevenen en dat hoe de wereld er de komende eeuwen uit gaat zien steeds meer een vraag wordt die aan alle wetenschappelijke modellen voorbij gaat. Kerst op het strand bij Nijmegen aan Zee?

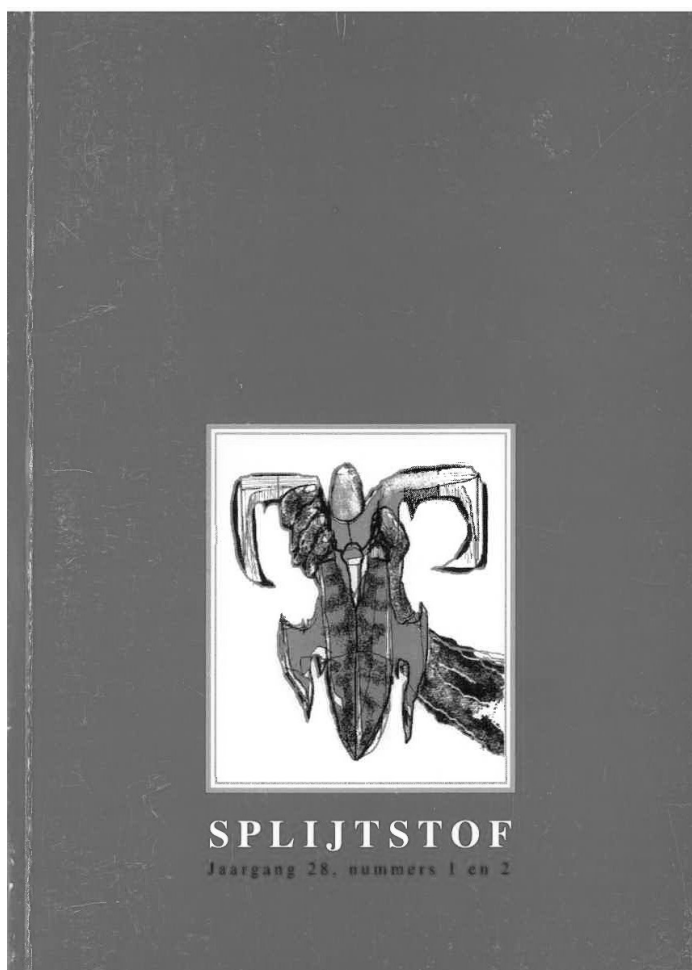
Terugkomend op Splijststof zou ik willen stellen dat we maar wat blij mogen zijn dat deze uitgave niet erg lijkt op de eerste uitgave uit 1972. Splijststof gaat mee met de tijd. Vandaar dat u in deze uitgave onder andere een interview met onze huidige

decaan kunt lezen; een opiniestuk over de wereld als thermodynamisch systeem en hoe wij in onze tijd het concept 'wereld' formuleren; recensies van recentelijk gepubliceerde boeken, en nog veel meer hippe stukken. Driewerf hoera voor de discontinuïteit!

Wat u blijft van al het voorgaande is hopelijk vooral het volgende: Splijtstof bestaat bijna vijftig jaar! Wat er ook verandert, mijlpalen moeten gevierd worden. In aanloop naar het vijftigjarige jubileum, bij deze de oproep: mocht u betrokken willen zijn bij de festiviteiten of ideeën hebben om de jubileumuitgave *nog* anders dan anders te maken? Schroom dan niet om contact met de redactie op te nemen.

Voor nu, veel leesplezier en Splijtstoffige saluut.

Gaia





Aarde, wereld, Cybertruck

De wetenschap van de klimaatcrisis en de taak van de filosofie

Ole Thijs

Er is vrijwel geen wetenschapper meer te vinden die eraan twijfelt: de klimaatcrisis is echt en is door mensen veroorzaakt. Ook het grote publiek lijkt hiervan steeds meer overtuigd. Wat echter maar weinig mensen weten, is hoe alarmerend de crisis is, hoe de wetenschap haar precies conceptualiseert en – belangrijker nog – welke paradigmaverandering aan die conceptualisatie ten grondslag ligt. Zoals we zullen zien is het de introductie van het *systeemdenken*, die de crisis van de Aarde aan de wetenschap openbaarde, maar die ook een grote nieuwe taak voor de filosofie aanduidt – namelijk, de (her)introductie van een filosofisch concept van *wereld*. Pas als we op wereld attent worden, wordt zowel wetenschappelijk als filosofisch begrijpelijk wat er met de Aarde gebeurt. In het volgende beschouwen we eerst de basisbegrippen van de achterliggende natuurkunde, om vervolgens de noodzaak van die filosofische taak aan te duiden.

I.

De Aarde is fysisch gezien een thermodynamisch *systeem*, zoals alle fysieke dingen in de wereld dat zijn: per definitie is een systeem een deel van het fysieke universum met een voor observatie gedefiniëerde grens.¹ Zo is een ei dat je kookt in een pannetje een systeem, jij bent zelf een systeem, de ruimte waarin je nu zit is een systeem, enzovoorts. Een systeem heeft bepaalde eigenschappen en daarnaast doen zich in vrijwel alle natuurlijke systemen bepaalde veranderingen of *processen* voor. Een ei, bijvoorbeeld, verandert van staat als er van buitenaf warmte-energie aan wordt toegevoegd: dooier en eiwit gaan over van de vloeibare naar de vaste fase, en het ei verdwijnt weldra in de sla.

Veranderingen op macro-schaal kunnen echter ook door interne processen optreden. In het geval van het ei: de schaal is voor bacteriën ondoordringbaar, maar vanaf het ontstaan van het ei zijn ze vaak als ‘verstekelingen’ al aan boord. Deze bacteriën voeden zich met het ei, vermenigvuldigen zich, en bij hun stofwisseling – een reeks chemische reacties – wordt onder andere H_2S geproduceerd: het giftige gas dat verantwoordelijk is voor de zo kenmerkende geur van rotte eieren. Bacteriën zijn echter niet de enige schuldige: zelfs een steriel ei produceert H_2S , niet alleen door interne processen maar ook door overdracht van massa over de grens van het systeem. Door de poreuze schaal kan namelijk CO_2 ontsnappen, dat zich in oplossing in het vloeibare ei bevindt. Hierdoor neemt de zuurgraad van het ei af en worden gunstige omstandigheden gecreëerd voor de spontane reactie van in het ei aanwezige zwavel en waterstof tot H_2S .

1 Yaşar Demirel & Vincent Gerbaud, *Nonequilibrium Thermodynamics: Transport and Rate Processes in Physical Chemical and Biological Systems*, Fourth Edition. Amsterdam / London / Cambridge, MA: Elsevier.

De thermodynamische notie van een ‘systeem’ zoals ons ei, dat energie en massa kan uitwisselen met zijn omgeving en waarin zich allerlei processen afspelen, is op zich niets nieuws. Wetenschappers en ingenieurs werken er al jaren mee, bijvoorbeeld om reactoren en olieraffinaderijen te ontwerpen. De grote revolutie in de *aardwetenschappen* betrof echter de realisatie dat wanneer we de ‘natuur’ – dat wil zeggen, het leven op Aarde, de atmosfeer, de oceanen, de bergen, enzoverder – bestuderen, we niet alleen naar systemen en omgevingen op lokale schaal moeten kijken, maar eerst en vooral de Aarde als één geïntegreerd systeem moeten zien. Er bestaan geen gescheiden systemen, geen omgevingen; alleen een wirwar van elkaar beïnvloedende en meer of minder stabiele processen (men denke aan de waterdampcyclus, van oceaan – wolk – regen – rivier – oceaan, maar ook aan extreem ingewikkelde chemische cycli in levende wezens en door mensen gebouwde fabrieken). De nieuwe wetenschap die de Aarde sinds de jaren ’80 met deze bril als *systeem Aarde* bestudeert staat bekend als *Earth System Science* (ESS).

II.

Systeem Aarde is een systeem dat, net zoals een ei, ver van zijn *evenwichtstoestand* verwijderd is. Dat wil zeggen: het is niet dood, het doet iets. De evenwichtstoestand is de stabielst mogelijke toestand van het systeem, waarin zich geen significante veranderingen meer voordoen, zeker niet op macro-niveau.² Stenen verkeren doorgaans in thermodynamisch evenwicht. Eieren niet, want er voltrekken zich, zoals we zagen, in een ei allerlei processen met effecten op macro-niveau, zoals rotting.

Als we zeggen dat Systeem Aarde ver van zijn evenwichtstoestand verwijderd is, dan bedoelen we dat het systeem een hoge graad van organisatie kent. Organisatie wordt in de thermodynamica weergegeven in termen van *energie* en *entropie*. Een vers ei bevindt zich in een hogere energietoestand dan een rot ei; het ‘heeft’ meer energie, die in de rottingsreacties vrijkomt (en door de bacteriën wordt gebruikt om zich te vermenigvuldigen).³ Daarbij neemt de entropie – de ‘chaos’ – van het systeem juist toe.

2 Er bestaat geen universeel geaccepteerde definitie voor ‘thermodynamisch evenwicht’ en deze staat wordt niet, zoals veel andere thermodynamische concepten, door wetten gedefinieerd. Het is in de beschrijving van systemen een vrijwel onmisbaar concept, maar over de precieze betekenis ervan is zelfs binnen de natuurkunde nog discussie; vandaar dat we hier niet dieper op de precieze definitie ingaan en slechts enkele algemene kenmerken noemen.

3 Natuurlijk is deze voorstelling van het rottingsproces versimpeld om eenvoudig de concepten van energie en entropie toe te lichten. In werkelijkheid kan, afhankelijk van de omstandigheden en van de precieze definitie van de grenzen van het systeem, de energie van het ei mogelijk juist toenemen tijdens het proces. Dergelijke moeilijkheden en onzekerheden gelden echter voor alle complexe, natuurlijke systemen, en waar het een aardwetenschapper om gaat is juist het in kaart brengen van alle onverwachte interacties en effecten.

Systeem Aarde is, in tegenstelling tot het ei, gedurende lange tijd *metastabiel*: het behoudt een bepaalde stabiele configuratie door middel van zichzelf herhalende processen, zonder welke het systeem tot een lagere energietoestand zou vervallen. Dat wil zeggen: waar het ei geen actief mechanisme heeft om te voorkomen dat het binnen afzienbare tijd begint te rotten, zit de Aarde vol met zulke mechanismen. Een voorbeeld: de atmosfeer, met haar waterdampcyclus, broeikas effect en vele andere mechanismen, houdt bepaalde omstandigheden – temperatuur, zuurstofgehalte – in stand, waardoor nóg complexere subsystemen, zoals kippen, kunnen ontstaan. Op hun beurt blijven deze weer geruime tijd metastabiel – en ze vormen een vehikel voor DNA, dat telkens opnieuw het tijdelijke systeem kip/ei inzet om zelf gedurende vele miljoenen jaren stabiel te blijven.

III.

Dankzij onderzoek naar steen- en ijskernen is er inmiddels uitgebreide kennis over de geschiedenis van Systeem Aarde. We weten hoe bepaalde processen in het verleden verliepen, wat de gemiddelde waarden van temperatuur, atmosferisch CO₂ en vele andere sleutelfactoren waren. Op basis van die kennis geven ESS-wetenschappers thans duidelijk aan: Systeem Aarde opereert sinds enige tijd (we hebben het dan over een schaal van tientallen jaren) in een *no-analog state*.⁴ Er is dus in miljoenen jaren bekende Aardgeschiedenis geen vergelijkbare staat te vinden – en dat terwijl in die geschiedenis ruwweg vergelijkbare staten elkaar afwisselen.

Effectief betekent dit dat we nauwelijks tot geen zekerheid meer hebben over de toekomst. Complexe systemen zoals de Aarde hebben de neiging om plotseling, op zeer heftige wijze, ‘om te slaan’ naar een nieuwe staat – vergelijk de relatief plotselinge intrede van rotting in het ei – nadat het weken goed is gebleven. Historisch zijn plotselinge veranderingen van de gemiddelde temperatuur, van rond de 5 °C binnen tientallen jaren, geen uitzondering; en in het verleden zijn deze gepaard gegaan met *minder snelle* veranderingen in de atmosferische concentratie van broeikasgassen dan de veranderingen die nu plaatsvinden door menselijke uitstoot.

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Het ‘akkoord van Parijs’ mikt op een maximale stijging van 1,5 °C tegen 2100. Tussen nu en dan zit nog 80 jaar. En laten we herhalen: in het verleden zijn atmosferische veranderingen die *kleiner* waren dan de atmosferische veranderingen tussen

⁴ Voor een zeer uitgebreid overzicht van de relevante wetenschappelijke publicaties, inclusief uitleg die geen enkele natuurwetenschappelijke achtergrond aanneemt, zie Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016.

1950 en vandaag, vergezeld gegaan van acute temperatuurschommelingen tot een factor drie groter dan de ‘veilige marge’ van Parijs. In klimaatberekeningen, zoals die achter het akkoord van Parijs, wordt echter alleen gerekend met graduele veranderingen in de processen van Systeem Aarde. Acute omslagpunten (*tipping points*) vallen namelijk naar aard niet te berekenen of voorspellen, puur door hun epistemologische asymmetrie: hun oorzaken zijn niet precies vast te stellen en ze kondigen zich niet aan. We weten alleen *dat* ze plaatsvinden, maar kunnen niet weten waardoor of wanneer precies, zoals je van een ei weet *dat* het ooit zal gaan rotten, maar als het nog maar net gelegd is niet kunt vaststellen of dat over één of twee maanden zal zijn.

Wat betekent dit alles nu? Dat de door wetenschappers vastgestelde *onzekerheid* in alle beleid gevoeglijk genegeerd wordt en dat, mede door het abject trage tempo van politieke actie, het einde van Systeem Aarde zoals wij dat kennen aannemelijk is. Het zal zo’n vaart niet lopen dat het gehele systeem tot zijn laagst mogelijke evenwichtstaat vervalt en de Aarde een dode steen wordt; er is echter onder wetenschappers consensus dat het stabiele, zachte klimaat van de afgelopen 10.000 jaar tot het verleden behoort. We krijgen sowieso te maken met een systeem met meer extremen, met een andere metastabiliteit die heftigere uitschieters kent qua temperatuur en andere omstandigheden.

IV.

Enkele weken voor het ter perse gaan van dit artikel kondigde Elon Musk de nieuwe elektrische auto van Tesla aan: de ‘Cybertruck’. Het voertuig is aanzienlijk langer en breder dan Amerika’s meest geliefde *pickup truck*, de Ford F-150. Wie ooit een Ford F-150 heeft gezien, weet dat deze op zijn beurt groter en zwaarder is dan een bestelbus. De Cybertruck is uitgerust met kogelwerend glas, een *onboard* computersysteem met 17-inch touchscreen om de auto te bedienen, en kan besteld worden met één, twee of drie krachtige elektromotoren – het snelste model haalt 0-100 km/u in 2,9 seconden.

In de media regende het reacties: de presentatie verliep niet vlekkeloos en het design van de Cybertruck is bedoeld om te provoceren. Maar niemand benoemde het daadwerkelijke probleem: dit zogenaamd milieuvriendelijke (want elektrische) apparaat is een ramp voor de stabiliteit van systeem Aarde. Het weegt meer dan eender welke benzine-personenauto en kost daarom meer energie om te verplaatsen; het is uitgerust met meer onnodige *features* dan eender welke personenauto en kost daarom grote hoeveelheden extra energie en vervuiling om te produceren. (Alleen al boordcomputer en touchscreen vergen tientallen zeldzame (aard)metalen, die in extreem vervuilende mijnoperaties worden gewonnen.)

De Tesla Cybertruck is een exponent van dat verschijnsel, dat de systeemcrisis van de Aarde heeft veroorzaakt. We hebben het dan over het ook wel als ‘systeem’ bekend

staande, thans wereldwijd verspreide consumentistisch vrijemarktkapitalisme.⁵ Natuurlijk is dit systeem niet precies in thermodynamische termen te vatten. Beschouwen we het echter door de bril van ESS, dan kunnen we in ieder geval vaststellen wat voor rol het speelt in de fysische processen die zich binnen Systeem Aarde voltrekken.

De hoeveelheid grondstoffen die je als mens moet gebruiken om te overleven ligt niet vast, net zoals de bijbehorende CO₂-uitstoot, impact op biodiversiteit, et cetera. Je ‘voetafdruk’ wordt bepaald door een grote verzameling *parameters*: hoeveel en hoe je reist, wat je eet, hoeveel en wat voor spullen je koopt, et cetera. Tot zover niets nieuws: het kopen van een Cybertruck heeft een grotere impact dan fietsen naar je werk. Maar wat bepaalt, niet op individuele maar op planetaire schaal, het ‘instellen’ van deze parameters?

Een suggestie: het consumentistisch kapitalisme is precies een voorbeeld van een systeem dat deze parameters reguleert, namelijk, een *wereld*. ‘Wereld’ kan worden begrepen als de structuur waarin de dingen verschijnen als datgene wat ze zijn: een structuur van betekenis die niet transcendentiaal is, noch puur onderdeel van de waarnemer of waarneming zelf, maar evengoed in de dingen en de taal zelf zit, en mettertijd kan veranderen. Consumentistisch kapitalisme is dan een naam voor een wereld waarin, om zomaar een voorbeeld te noemen, een zeker

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drie ton zware elektrische truck verschijnt als een positieve ontwikkeling. Dankzij deze positieve ‘waardering’ kopen mensen dergelijke producten, in plaats van het hiermee gemoeid gaande geld te investeren in werkelijk duurzame oplossingen voor transport: de parameters voor hun voetafdruk zijn bijgesteld, en wel op zo’n manier dat de mens-gerelateerde fysische processen op Aarde nóg verder ontregeld worden.

5 De kwalificatie van het vrijemarktkapitalisme als ‘consumentistisch’ verwijst naar de inrichting van het huidige economische model, waarin winst wordt gemaakt met de productie van goederen (die overigens niet fysiek hoeven te zijn; een film of *targeted advertising*-profiel is ook een goed). Om de productie te verhogen, worden zowel de goederen zelf als de bijbehorende marketing ontworpen op een maximalisatie van consumptie. Het systeem staat of valt bij het genereren van een zo groot mogelijke behoefte tot consumptie. Voor de herkomst en uitwerking van deze concepten, zowel als zeer penetrante analyses van de werking van consumentisme in ‘culturele’ media (m.n. film), zie het werk van Bernard Stiegler: voornamelijk relevant zijn de *Symbolic Misery*-serie (Cambridge: Polity, 2014, 2015); *States of Shock* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); de *Disbelief and Discredit*-serie (Cambridge: Polity, 2011, 2013, 2014); *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

V.

Het zou een veel langer artikel vergen om de hier geboden filosofische suggestie uit te werken; namelijk, de suggestie dat een filosofisch concept van *wereld* onmisbaar is om te begrijpen wat er momenteel met de *Aarde* gebeurt, en dat het natuurwetenschappelijke paradigma dat ons leert wat er met de Aarde gebeurt tegelijkertijd

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ruimte biedt om zo'n concept van wereld te integreren. Dat wil echter niet zeggen dat de filosofie hier ondergeschikt wordt gemaakt aan de (aard)wetenschap. Integendeel: dit is een oproep tot een grootschalig en naar aard filosofisch project, dat *vanuit* het consumentisch-kapitalistische systeem dat systeem zelf moet onderzoeken. Het moet van ieder

verschijnsel in onze wereld vragen hoe en waarom het verschijnt, en meer nog, het moet van alles dat juist *niet* verschijnt achterhalen hoe het in de ervaring teruggehaald en bevraagd kan worden. (Een voorbeeld: een Cybertruck, die zie je wel, maar de energie slurpende serverparken achter Spotify's muziekdienst en algoritmen, die telkens opnieuw de data van jouw muziek naar je smartphone sturen, zie je *niet*. De totale milieu-impact van streamen is waarschijnlijk *groter* dan die van het kopen van plastic CD's, cassettes of platen.⁶) Vervolgens moeten alle aan het kapitalistisch-consumentistisch systeem inherente aannames – dat technologische vooruitgang de facto positief is, dat grote glimmende trucks aantrekkelijk zijn, dat het een goed idee is om een enorm vervoersmiddel in persoonlijke eigendom te hebben, dat alles zonder uitlaat duurzaam is, dat geen apparaat compleet is zonder kleurentouchscreen, enzovoorts, enzoverder – worden geïdentificeerd en door alternatieven worden vervangen; en dat terwijl helemaal niet evident is *hoe* die vervanging plaats moet vinden.

De precieze uitvoering moge onduidelijk zijn, maar één ding is zeker: willen we de Aarde – en dus onszelf – voor de ergste destabilisatie behoeden, dan moeten we de parameters volgens welke we leven radicaal bijstellen. Dat wil zeggen: we moeten een *nieuwe wereld* bouwen. Het uitvinden van telkens nieuwe technische snufjes – Cybertrucks, *cloud-based computing*, maar ook CO2-opslagtechnieken, *internet of things*, et cetera – wordt in de publieke opinie nu juist vaak als het bouwen van nieuwe werelden begrepen. Maar werelden bestaan niet uit dingen, ze bestaan uit betekenissen en verschijningswijzen. Juist de veranderlijkheid hiervan maakt de (in)stabiliteit van het menselijke subsysteem van Systeem Aarde uit. Willen we voorkomen dat

6 Een niet-academisch samenvattend artikel, met links naar relevante bronnen, is te vinden op <https://theconversation.com/music-streaming-has-a-far-worse-carbon-footprint-than-the-heyday-of-records-and-cds-new-findings-114944>.

Systeem Aarde omvalt, dan zal het consumentistisch-kapitalistische systeem moeten worden vervangen door een nieuw systeem, een nieuwe wereld,⁷ waarin de dingen er heel anders uitzien.

7 De in dit artikel gesuggereerde analogie tussen *systeem* en *wereld* suggereert zeker niet eenvoudigweg een equivalentie, maar duidt een open vraag aan: is ‘wereld’ simpelweg een emergent subsysteem van het menselijke subsysteem van Systeem Aarde? Gaat wereld juist aan alle systeemdenken vooraf, omdat zonder wereld ook de Aarde niet als systeem kan verschijnen? Dergelijke vragen verdienen uitgebreide aandacht, maar mogen niet afleiden van de hier gepresenteerde kernhypothese: dat de manier waarop de dingen in de consumentistisch-kapitalistische wereld verschijnen schade aan Systeem Aarde toebrengt.



Voorbij het politieke?

Over de onbedoelde dictatuur van het 19^e eeuwse anarchisme en daarvoorbij

Sami Dogan

Bij verschillende 19^e-eeuwse anarchisten, zoals Kropotkin en Bakoenin, lijkt het idee aanwezig te zijn dat er een mogelijkheid bestaat om ooit in een post-politieke situatie terecht te komen. Met het begrip “post-politieke situatie” doel ik op een stand van zaken waarin “het politieke”, zoals beschreven door Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), niet langer bestaat. Schmitt vat “het politieke” op als het domein dat het uiterste onderscheid in zich heeft. Namelijk het onderscheid tussen vriend en vijand, waar de uiterste consequentie uit voort kan vloeien: de oorlog. Politiek draait dus primair om de *mogelijkheid* tot conflict. Schmitt is de mening toegedaan dat politiek een ‘onvoltooibaar’ gebeuren is.

Het anarchisme afkomstig uit de 19^e eeuw meent dat er wel een mogelijkheid bestaat dat de mensheid ooit in een situatie zal geraken die non-politiek zou kunnen worden genoemd, en derhalve een post-politieke situatie is. In dit essay wordt dit uitgangspunt eenvoudigweg aangenomen: 19^e-eeuws anarchisme leidt uiteindelijk tot een situatie die “post-politiek” genoemd kan worden. Met 19^e-eeuws anarchisme doel ik in dit paper voornamelijk op Kropotkin (1842-1921), Bakoenin (1814-1876) en Proudhon (1809-1865). De post-anarchist Saul Newman diagnosticeert bij deze 19^e-eeuwse anarchisten het denkbeeld dat de mens bepaalde essentiële eigenschappen heeft, waar vervolgens het revolutionair potentieel van deze mens uit wordt afgeleid.¹ Zo zou volgens Bakoenin de mens essentieel vrij zijn en in overeenstemming met de rationele natuur.² Een soortgelijke antropologie vinden we bij Kropotkin, die meent dat de mens door haar menselijke natuur is gericht op “wederzijdse hulp”. Een complementair denkbeeld is dat van Proudhon, die op basis van een bepaalde menselijke natuur beargumenteert dat “eigendom” in strijd is met deze natuur.³

Het is van belang om te vragen naar de oorzaken die aan dit denken ten grondslag liggen, omdat ik denk dat anarchisme weleens een hernieuwd theoretisch en praktisch potentieel zou kunnen hebben als het van bovenstaand denkbeeld wordt bevrijd.

De centrale vraag van dit essay luidt: is het denkbeeld van het 19^e-eeuwse anarchisme, namelijk dat een post-politieke situatie op politiek ontisch niveau bereik-

1 Zie o.a. Andrew M. Koch, “Poststructuralism and the Epistemological Basis of Anarchism,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 23, no. 3 (September 1993): 330. En verder: Saul Newman, “Towards a Politics of Postanarchism,” in *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-authoritarianism and the dislocation of power*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001).

2 Michael Bakunin, “God and the State,” in *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, red. Arthur Lehning (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 133.

3 Andrew M. Koch, “Poststructuralism and the Epistemological Basis of Anarchism,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 23, no. 3 (September 1993): 330.

baar is, op politiek ontologisch niveau onhoudbaar? De positie die ik zal verdedigen is dat het van belang is om een nieuwe ontologie voor het anarchisme te denken: een post-anarchisme. Oftewel, anarchisme gedacht als afwezigheid van een grond, of grondend principe. Post-anarchisme, bevrijdt van positieve essentialistische antropologie, heeft een belangrijk theoretische en praktisch potentieel.

In dit essay zal ik in de eerste plaats Schmitts kritiek op het anarchisme behandelen. Centraal hierbij staan zijn opvattingen aangaande de uitzonderingstoestand, soevereiniteit en het politieke. Uit zijn beschrijving van het politieke, zal ik verder een definitie van het post-politieke afleiden. Tot slot wordt er aandacht geschonken aan post-anarchisme, middels Saul Newmans gedachtegoed.

1. Carl Schmitt

1.1. De Uitzonderingstoestand: nieuwe-ordening & beslissing

Een positieve essentialistische antropologie⁴, waar een politieke filosofie op kan worden gebouwd, leidt er toe dat een post-politieke situatie denkbaar en mogelijk wordt. Op het moment dat de bovenstaande politieke programma's – in harmonie met deze menselijke natuur – zijn uitgevoerd, zal er een "stolling" van de situatie plaatsvinden. Als het bezit is afgeschaft, de staat omver geworpen en ieder zichzelf heeft onderworpen aan de rationele autoriteit van de wetenschap, dan ligt het paradijs in het verschiet. Zodra er een herverdeling, een herordening, of een herschikking van de huidige stand van zaken heeft plaatsgevonden, is de revolutie voltooid, de mens in haar essentie geactualiseerd en het politieke voltooid. Aldus het 19^e-eeuws anarchisme. Helaas doet de werkelijkheid zich een stuk weerbarstiger voor.

Schmitt schrijft aan het begin van zijn *Politische Theologie* het volgende: "Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet"⁵. Even verderop schrijft hij "Alle prägnanten Begriffe der modernen Staatslehre sind säkularisierte theologische Begriffe."⁶ De twee voorgaande citaten vormen de ruggengraat van de volgende bespreking. Wat betekent het eerste citaat?

De uitzonderingstoestand (*Ausnahmezustand*) is volgens Schmitt de toestand waarin de normale gang van zaken wordt opgeschort. Deze toestand is "eine prinzipiell unbegrenzte Befugnis, das heisst die Suspendierung der gesamten bestehenden Ordnung. [...] Im Ausnahmefall suspendiert der Staat das Rechts, kraft eines Selbst-

4 Met een "positieve essentialistische antropologie" doel ik op een opvatting van mens-zijn, die beweert dat de mens bepaalde positieve (in de dubbele zin: enerzijds als "gunstig", maar ook "aanwezig") kwaliteiten heeft. Deze kwaliteiten zouden dan verder ook tot de essentie van dit mens-zijn behoren. Max Stirner (1806-1856) is een denker die een uitzondering zou kunnen vormen op deze stelling.

5 Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot GmbH, 1985), 11.

6 Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 50.

erhaltungsrechtes”.⁷ Als de uitzonderingstoestand wordt uitgeroepen vindt er een opschorting plaats van alle ingestelde wetten. Het uitroepen van deze toestand is altijd verbonden aan een beslissing (*die Entscheidung*). Wie over het vermogen beschikt het besluit te nemen om deze uitzonderingstoestand in te stellen, is soeverein.

De implicaties van deze opvatting zijn als volgt: als de beslissing elke ordening als zodanig constitueert (opgevat in ontologische zin); dan is de beslissing die deze ordening constitueert niet gebonden aan de normen van de ordening die wordt ingesteld middels de zojuist genomen beslissing. Met andere woorden: wetten en normen die van kracht zijn tijdens het ‘besluitmoment’, gelden niet voor *dit specifieke* besluit. Sterker nog, volgens Schmitt wordt “im Ausnahmefall (...) die Norm vernichtet”.⁸ Voor het besluit in een uitzonderlijke situatie behoeft geen rekening af te worden gelegd aan de norm, aangezien het om een wezenlijk andersoortige situatie gaat. Normen gelden in normale situaties. De wetten zijn geijkt op een normale gang van zaken. “Die Verfassung kann höchstens angeben, *wer* in einem solchen Falle handeln darf”.⁹ Aangezien een norm nooit uitsluitel biedt in een uitzonderingsgeval, kunnen algemene richtlijnen – zoals ‘wetten’ – alleen een “wie” benoemen die beslist, maar nooit vastleggen *hoe* deze ‘wie’ zal moeten beslissen.

Overeenkomstig het tweede voorgaande ruggengraatcitaat van Schmitt vinden deze politieke begrippen hun oorsprong in de theologie. Eén voorbeeld dat hij aanhaalt is de analoge betekenis van de uitzonderingstoestand in relatie tot het wonder. Het wonder is namelijk eveneens een situatie die afwijkt van de normale gang van zaken, waarbij een soevereine kracht van buiten het systeem ingrijpt in het systeem zelf, teneinde de normale gang van zaken op te schorten en de (natuur)wetten buiten spel te zetten.¹⁰

Schmitt onderschrijft de gedachte dat “die Metaphysik der intensivste und klarste Ausdruck einer Epoche ist”.¹¹ De overgang van een transcendentie-denken naar een immanentie-denken in de metafysica in de 19^e eeuw, heeft ook een uitwerking gehad op de legitimatie van autoriteit. Zo heeft dit ertoe geleid dat men het geloof

*Autoriteit als zodanig is dus in
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7 Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 19-20.

8 Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 19.

9 Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 12. Nadruk zelf toegevoegd.

10 Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 49.

11 Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 60.

in een soeverein in de vorm van een koning is verloren en dat daarvoor in de plaats de soevereiniteit van het volk is gekomen.¹² Met andere woorden, autoriteit die eerst door de koning werd uitgeoefend, wordt nu door het volk uitgeoefend.

Autoriteit als zodanig is dus in het denken van onder andere de anarchisten nooit opgeheven, er heeft zich in de eerste plaats een *verplaatsing* voltrokken. Of anders geformuleerd: er heeft louter een verplaatsing of verschuiving van de *arché* plaatsgevonden in het metafysische denken, en daarmee het politieke denken. De legitimiteit van de soeverein is opgeheven en verplaatst naar een andere representant, namelijk die van het individuele subject, die allen te samen het volk voortbrengen.¹³ Dit individuele subject, de mens, wordt gedefinieerd door de anarchisten middels een positieve essentialistische antropologie.

In deze verplaatsing van de autoriteit, in het afschaffen van de oude soeverein en het her-gronden van de gronding van autoriteit; ligt de paradox van het anarchisme volgens Schmitt. Zo schrijft hij:

Jede Präntention einer Entscheidung muss für den Anarchisten böse sein, weil das Richtige sich von selbst ergibt, wenn man die Immanenz des Lebens nicht mit solche Präntentionen stört. Freilich, diese radikale Antithese zwingt ihn, sich selbst entschieden gegen die Dezision zu entscheiden; und bei (...) Bakunin, ergibt sich die seltsame *Paradoxie*, dass er *theoretisch der Theologe des Anti-Theologischen und in der Praxis der Diktator einer Anti-Diktatur werden musste*.¹⁴

De anarchist belandt zodoende in een impasse. Voor een anarchist kan ‘de beslissing’ nooit meer georiënteerd zijn op een transcendentale norm, omdat het ‘juiste’ (*das Richtige*) zich van zichzelf uit én vanzelf zal uitwijzen. Mensen bezitten immers een immanente oriëntatie op het goede. Oftewel een juiste ordening ontwikkelt uit zichzelf en vanzelf, zolang er maar geen heerschappij wordt uitgeoefend over individuele subjecten. Echter, de “paradox” wil dat Bakoenin, maar ook de andere 19^e-eeuwse anarchisten, zodoende een theologie moeten ontwikkelen van de anti-theologie: een gezaghebbende leer van de anti-theologie. Er moet altijd een *dictator* zijn die deze anarchistische ordening per decreet afkondigt. Hier zit de crux: de essentialistische antropologie van de anarchisten leidt uiteindelijk niet tot een opheffing van de macht, maar tot een nieuwe dictatuur. Het verplaatst autoriteit, maar schaft haar niet af.

12 Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 63-66.

13 Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 83-84.

14 Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 85. Nadruk zelf toegevoegd.

1.2. Definiëring van het post-politieke middels Schmitt's begrip van het politieke

Om te kunnen duiden wat het “post-politieke” inhoudt, is het allereerst belangrijk om te bepalen wat eigenlijk het politieke omvat. Wat is het politieke? Wederom dient deze vraag ontologisch opgevat te worden. De notie van het politieke, die Schmitt behandelt in *der Begriff des Politischen*, wordt volgens hem vaak polemisches afgezet tegenover begrippen als religieus, cultureel, economisch, die onderdelen zouden zijn van een *Gesellschaft*¹⁵ en niet van het politieke. Een andere definiëring die hij suggereert is “het politieke” gelijkstellen aan “de staat”, die dan op zijn beurt weer tegenover *Gesellschaft* wordt afgezet.¹⁶ In feite valt dit onderscheid niet zo scherp te maken volgens Schmitt, omdat staat en *Gesellschaft* regelmatig in elkaar grijpen. Hierdoor heeft alles de potentie om politiek te worden.¹⁷

Het onderscheid tussen “vriend” en “vijand” is volgens Schmitt een fundamenteel onderscheid van politiek. Dit onderscheid is een zelfstandig onderscheid en geeft het politieke haar eigenheid.¹⁸ Eigen aan het politieke is dat het geen specifiek onderwerpsveld (*Sachgebiet*) omvat. Het valt niet te reduceren tot zaken zoals “het goede”, “het schone” of “het ware”, en nadrukkelijk ook niet tot “economische belangen”.¹⁹ Het vriend-vijand-onderscheid heeft betrekking op een concreet, existentieel onderscheid: een zaak (in het uiterste geval) van leven en dood.²⁰ De anarchisten maken zich hier schuldig aan een categoriefout volgens Schmitt: de anarchisten verwarren bijvoorbeeld het goede met het politieke, terwijl deze twee niet tot elkaar te reduceren zijn. Het conflict dat optreedt tussen vriend en vijand laat zich niet beslissen middels een *tertium comparationis*: een norm die vooraf is opgesteld om te bemiddelen tussen beiden.²¹ Wat impliceert dit aangaande het politieke gebeuren en het post-politieke?

De essentialistische antropologie van de anarchisten leidt uiteindelijk niet tot een opheffing van de macht, maar tot een nieuwe dictatuur. Het verplaatst autoriteit, maar schaft haar niet af.

15 *Gesellschaft* is of vertaalbaar met “samenleving” of met “maatschappij”. Het begrip *Gesellschaft* draagt een zekere connotatie in zich die niet goed te vertalen valt, derhalve laat ik het origineel staan.

16 Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot GmbH, 2015), 21-23.

17 Schmitt, *Der Begriff*, 23.

18 Schmitt, *Der Begriff*, 25.

19 Schmitt, *Der Begriff*, 25.

20 Schmitt, *Der Begriff*, 26-27.

21 Schmitt, *Der Begriff*, 26.

Het is niet zo dat men altijd maar met elkaar op de vuist moet gaan, maar er bestaat wel altijd de reële mogelijkheid dat er oorlog uitbreekt.²² Elke situatie *kan* politiek worden. De vraag is welke omstandigheden mensen kunnen motiveren zich naar dit onderscheid te groeperen.²³ Wat houdt hieruit afgeleid dan het post-politieke in? Dit zou de situatie zijn waarin het vriend-vijand-onderscheid is opgeheven, een situatie zonder de mogelijkheid tot conflict.

2. Anarchisme als *an-archè*

Tot nu toe heb ik vooral aandacht besteed aan de kritiek van Schmitt jegens het 19^e-eeuwse anarchisme. Is de kritiek van Schmitt de doodsteek voor het anarchisme? Moet het nu als geheel afgeschreven worden? Op dit moment, in de 21^e eeuw, waarin het

Dit zou de situatie zijn waarin het vriend-vijand-onderscheid is opgeheven, een situatie zonder de mogelijkheid tot conflict.

soms lijkt alsof wij ons op de weg terug begeven naar het autoritarisme dat de 20^e eeuw tekende, is anarchisme een idee dat aandacht verdient, aangezien het stevige kritieken levert op de legitimiteit van autoriteit. Derhalve kan het

ons wapenen tegen de kuiperijen van het autoritarisme. Bovendien is het van belang om *voorbij* het hier bekritiseerde essentialistische mensbeeld te denken, dat de achilleshiel van het 19^e-eeuwse anarchisme vormt. Waar ligt de uitweg?

Volgens Saul Newman biedt Lacan's zogenaamde "(...) *notion of the lack as a gap*" een oplossing.²⁴ Wat houdt dit in? Newman schrijft:

[R]adical emptiness produced by signification, yet escaping it, and which is, therefore, neither outside nor inside the structure of signification, was used here to theorize a non-essentialist outside to power. It seemed to satisfy the two contrary, yet necessary, terms of antiauthoritarian project: something which forms a constitutive outside to power and discourse, yet is not necessarily of a different order to power and discourse, but which is, rather, produced by them as a lack within their own structure. This pointed to the possibility of transcending the seemingly stifling contradiction in this anti-authoritarian project.²⁵

Volgens Newman is er dus in de structuur van autoriteit een bepaalde leemte of tekort aanwezig, die een plaats biedt aan het bekritisieren van autoriteit. Deze plaats is enerzijds een *constitutive outside*, het is een plaats die buiten het vertoog en de macht

22 Schmitt, *Der Begriff*, 34.

23 Schmitt, *Der Begriff*, 33-34.

24 Newman, "Towards a Politics of Postanarchism," 160.

25 Newman, "Towards a Politics of Postanarchism," 160.

staat, maar wel het vertoog en de macht kan beïnvloeden. Anderzijds is deze plaats echter een product van de autoriteitsstructuur en wordt voortgebracht door wat er mist in die structuur. Het is dus niet helemaal hetzelfde als de huidige autoriteitsstructuur, maar toont wat er mist in die structuur.

Het 19^e-eeuwse anarchisme mist deze positie, het ontsnapt niet aan de valkuilen die reeds aanwezig zijn in het denken dat het bekritiseert. Het 19^e-eeuwse anarchisme wordt als het ware besmet door zijn vijanden.²⁶ Wat is het alternatief? Newman beargumenteert dat anarchisten niet direct de staatsmacht zouden moeten aanvallen, maar beter om de staatsmacht heen kunnen werken. Anarchisten moeten over alternatieve organisatievormen nadenken; in plaats van de frontale aanval te openen op de staat kan er om de staat heen gewerkt worden.²⁷ Zulke praktijken worden door Newman “*deinstuting practices*” genoemd. In plaats van de macht verplaatsen van de ene naar de andere plek: van God naar de staat naar het individu, zouden we eigenlijk om de instituties heen moeten gaan. De staat wordt dan niet in directe zin aangevallen, maar door het niet erkennen van instituties wordt de staat wel ondermijnd. Volgens Newman kunnen anarchisten alleen op deze manier loskomen uit de door Schmitt beschreven paradox: dat het uitroepen van de anarchie altijd gepaard moet gaan met een (dictatoriale) beslissing.²⁸

3. Conclusie: het politieke voorbij

De vraag die in dit essay aan onderzoek werd onderworpen is de volgende: Is het denkbild dat een post-politieke situatie op politiek ontisch niveau bereikbaar is, op politiek ontologisch niveau onhoudbaar? In dit essay is het volgende aan bod gekomen. Ten eerste heb ik Schmitts kritiek op het anarchisme beschreven, die mijns inziens voornamelijk ontspringt aan het voorgenoemde mensbeeld. Ten tweede is Schmitts opvatting over het politieke uiteengezet en daaruit een begrip van het post-politieke afgeleid. Tot slot heb ik een schets gegeven van een oplossing van de uiteengezette paradox van het anarchisme, aan de hand van Saul Newmans post-anarchisme. Deze paradox was de volgende: alvorens de staat van anarchie bereikt kan worden is de paradoxale beslissing nodig die de orde van het anarchisme uitroept.

Aan iedere ordening gaat in ontologisch opzicht een beslissing vooraf, ook de anarchistische ordening, aldus Schmitt. Autoriteit op een immanente wijze funderen, leidt er slechts toe dat er een verplaatsing plaatsvindt van autoriteit en *niet* een vernietiging of bevrijding van autoriteit. Een verplaatsing van een transcendente grond (God)

26 Saul Newman, “Conclusion” in *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 165.

27 Newman, “Conclusion,” 165-166.

28 Newman, “Conclusion,” 166.

naar een immanente grond (de intrinsiek goede en rationele mens). Het vermogen tot ordening ligt nu besloten in iedere persoon zelf, maar deze personen zijn wel onderworpen aan hun wezenskenmerken.

Als we in de “anarchistische ordening” zouden aankomen, dan zou de positieve essentialistische antropologie van de anarchisten ervoor zorgen dat deze ordening blijft bestaan. Het onderscheid tussen vriend en vijand is opgeheven. Hier vindt volgens de logica van Schmitt een categoriefout plaats: de anarchisten verwarren bijvoorbeeld

*‘De vijand’ kan best een lieve
vrouw, een goeie jongen,
een aardige kerel of een
winstgevende zakenpartner zijn.*

het goede met het politieke, terwijl deze twee niet tot elkaar te reduceren zijn. Al zouden mensen inherent goed zijn, doet dat dan iets teniet aan het bestaan van het politieke? Het politieke is een eigen domein, dat niet valt te reduceren tot andere domeinen.

Het politieke is de mogelijkheid van conflict in iedere situatie. De mogelijkheid dat mensen worden opgedeeld in vrienden en vijanden. “De vijand” kan best een lieve vrouw, een goeie jongen, een aardige kerel of een winstgevende zakenpartner zijn. “De vriend” kan dit op zijn beurt allemaal juist niet zijn. In een anarchistische ordening zal het ook zo zijn dat het politieke onderscheid tussen vriend en vijand blijft bestaan. Echter, een politieke ontologie zou de mogelijkheid van conflict moeten onderkennen.

Het probleem van het soort anarchisme dat de altijd bestaande mogelijkheid van conflict niet expliciet erkent, is dat de theorie onderuitgaat zodra iemand de positieve antropologie van de anarchist afwijst. Er ontstaat dan namelijk meteen de mogelijkheid bestaat dat men zich zal groeperen naar het onderscheid vriend en vijand: voorstanders van de positieve antropologie en tegenstanders. Newman probeert met zijn post-anarchisme te ontsnappen aan deze valkuil. In plaats van een frontale aanval op de staat, moeten we aan *deinstuting practices* doen. Er zou dus geen duidelijk politiek einddoel moeten zijn dat zich conformeert aan een bepaalde antropologie, maar een maakbaar doel dat zich afstemt op verschillende situaties. Politiek wordt zo iets wat nooit voorbij is. Een gedachte die misschien ontmoedigend lijkt, maar tegelijkertijd bevrijdend is.

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B&B: Brighton & Brexit

Last year, I decided to do a research internship in Brighton. Back when some of us thought Brexit might actually happen and Theresa May was the worst prime minister we could imagine. It seems like ages ago. Anyway, here is the story of how (on earth) I came to do this and what it exactly entailed.

Coming Up with a Plan

The year was 2018 (summertime), I had decided to take an extra year to complete my Bachelor's degree and, more importantly, to deepen my knowledge in political philosophy. I had been thinking about applying for the Research Master's program for a while already, but wanted to explore the field of political philosophy some more 'on my own terms'. Moreover, I had never studied abroad before and felt like this could be the right moment. Instead of 'just' following some courses, I decided to use this time for a project of my own choosing.

Through the assistance of Rinske de Graaff Stoffers of the International Office and various teachers, the 'Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics' (CAPPE) caught my eye. The institute specializes in contemporary political philosophy, and their research areas really interested me. Thus, I wrote to CAPPE and got a reply within the day (!): I was very welcome to join for a while.

I emailed back and forth with CAPPE during the summer, working out the general details concerning how long I would be staying and who would be willing to supervise me. Usually when students decide to go abroad, they choose some modules from the university where they are going. CAPPE, although connected to the University of Brighton, is a research institute. I therefore had to come up with my own project as to what I would be doing for five months. In other words: I had to create some sort of program that actually would meet the standards of an internship. Also, I needed funding to go abroad. Luckily Erasmus+ does not only offer funds to students who plan to study abroad, but also to those who want to do an internship such as myself. As such, my time abroad became a sort of hybrid combination of both studying and doing an internship.

Living in Brighton

Brighton is famous for its exuberant character, and I believe that the city in some ways tries to keep this image alive. Thanks to the Royal Pavilion, a former royal residence

of The Prince of Wales (later George IV), the seaside town became very attractive. Brighton stands out against other seaside towns, such as Eastbourne. Nowadays the city is known as the vegan and gay capital of the UK (although Bristol seems to be catching up).

It took me longer than I expected to get used to the city. In particular, living right along the seaside was something that baffled me every day as I stepped out of the door. Compared to Nijmegen, Brighton is much more crowded (although compared to London it was nothing of course). There are constantly lots of people coming into the city, especially on the weekends. I particularly remember when, after the 'Easter break' (three weeks off somewhere in April) the city became even livelier. Around that time, various summer activities, such as the festivals 'Brighton Fringe' and 'The Great Escape', were taking off. The weather was getting better, and there were many things to do on the street.

As for my internship, the idea was that I would deepen my knowledge of the work of Ernesto Laclau. I would do this under the supervision of Dr Mark Devenney and Dr Clare Woodford. The project would be similar to that of a Bachelor's thesis, but slightly different because I would be the manager of my own project. It was up to me to decide what I wanted to do and my supervisors then could decide in what way they could assist me.

Together we decided to start a reading group on one of Laclau's works: *On Populist Reason*. I also joined other reading groups, to get a broader perspective on the research activities that were going on at CAPPE. The topics of those reading groups varied from the work of Gilles Deleuze, to essays about the far-right movements/parties. Next to all of this, I sat in on various lectures with other students. As you can guess, my first two months consisted of a lot of reading.

Putting Pen to Paper

Of course, my internship needed an outcome, some sort of product, which would reflect my hard work. You can read this product of mine in this very same issue. It is titled 'Representing the People: Between Hegemony and Rupture'. I will not bore you with the details, as you can find them in the essay itself. However, I will briefly tell you something about the process behind this essay.

The very first Brexit was supposed to happen during my time there: on the 29th of March. It then got postponed to the 22nd of May, and so on, and so on. Nevertheless, it was (and still is) a unique political debate and I was there in the UK to witness it. For example, I was present at the 'People's Vote March' on the 23rd of March. This protest was supported by all kinds of people, who were united by the fact that they believed that Parliament was no longer able to defend their interests. As someone who is studying political philosophy, I felt like I had to address the issue in some way.

More specifically, I was studying and writing about populism. Brexit may be many things, but it is above all a debate about the British people. Therefore, Brexit, being a populist debate, turned out to be a very nice illustration of what I was writing about. Laclau claims that it is wrong to denigrate populism as a perverted type of politics,

as if a populist discourse is mere rhetoric and does not engage itself with the ‘real’ world. In my opinion, something similar happened in the Brexit debate. There were so many claims on what ‘the British people’ might be that the whole debate started looking silly. With Laclau, however, I was able to show that ‘populisms’ do not appear out of thin air. All of these discussions, parties and leaders somehow correspond to a set of real demands. The essay I wrote was therefore highly motivated by my wish to understand the seeming silliness of populist discourses such as Brexit, but without denigrating them, as you can read in the first part of my essay.

*There were so many claims
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Laclau even goes so far as to claim that all politics is populist to some extent; a claim that I was not willing to agree on. Due to the advice of my supervisors, I decided to read and include in my final essay another author: Jacques Rancière. The article you find in this edition is, however, a revised version in which the part on Rancière is not included. Nonetheless, I have included some references to Rancière in the footnotes, so that you can see on what basis I diverge from Laclau’s theories.

The last part of my essay mostly considers the notion of representation, as proposed by Laclau. I argue that, through notions such as ‘rhetoric’, ‘the name’ and ‘the excess’, Laclau presents us with certain displacements in our understanding of representation. As a result, I believe that we should revise our notion of representation. In relation to that, I try to demonstrate in what way populisms expose certain limits of our understanding of representation nowadays, especially concerning representative democracies.

Looking Back

To conclude, I would like to say that my time in Brighton was, for various reasons, very interesting. What I liked the most was the fact that I could take my time to really deepen my knowledge on a specific topic. Moreover, I believe that working on similar topics in different circumstances truly broadens your perspective on things. I would definitely advise other students to see if an internship such as the one I did would be an option for them.



Representing ‘the People’: Between Hegemony and Rupture

A critical inquiry into the disruptive potential
of the people against the institutional order

Janneke Toonders

Introduction

For a long time populism has been considered a threat to the unity of the rational community.¹ It was Ernesto Laclau who first claimed that its anti-institutionalist character should be considered the result of a crisis in the representative system.² Laclau wrote about populism without denigrating it as a ‘perverted’ form of rational politics. On the contrary, populism is in his view the return of democratic politics. In Europe today, there are several populist parties growing more prominent by the day, of both the left and right.³ On the right, we have examples such as *Forum voor Democratie* in the Netherlands, *Rassemblement National* in France and *Fidesz* in Hungary. On the left *Podemos* in Spain, *Syriza* in Greece, and even Jeremy Corbyn with the British Labour Party are deemed examples *par excellence* of a left-wing populist strategy.⁴ This essay will engage with Laclau’s hypothesis and consider whether populism exposes the limits of the model of the representative democracy.

Many of these populisms rose rapidly to the level of national representative institutions. They have done so - or so I will argue - because they were successful in transforming the widespread dissatisfaction with the current representative system into support for their own agendas. It is, however, not the specific content of these various populisms that I am interested in. Rather, I am concerned with the general trend in which ‘the people’ come to oppose the representative democratic institutions and question the ability of that system to defend their interests. I argue against the dismissal of populism as properly political. The question is therefore how to understand the populist phenomenon and its relation to representative democracies.

The complexity of populism becomes immediately clear when looking at the Brexit debate. The United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union on the 23rd of June 2016. In the debate running up to that referendum, much was said about ‘the British people’. The precise content of the British people, however, was much debated and fought over. Each campaign projected a different vision of the people, and consequently a different picture of the future. Among the many campaigns were, for example: *People’s Vote UK*, *Vote Leave*, and *Britain Stronger in Europe*. The *Vote*

1 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2018), x.

2 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 116, 137.

3 Some have tried to distinct left-wing populisms from right-wing populisms (See for example: *For a Left Populism* by Chantal Mouffe). Although I do think that it is interesting to look at their respective differences, I believe it is unnecessary to do so for the purposes in this essay and will continue to only speak of populism.

4 Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), 23, 38.

Leave and *Britain Stronger in Europe* campaigns, for example, opposed each other on a variety of issues, concerning healthcare, schooling, and job opportunities, as I shall discuss later.⁵ What is interesting is that both insist that their claims regarding these issues apply to all of the British people.

Three years has passed since the referendum, parliament still cannot decide on a deal, and this makes the situation very tense. Notions such as (British) democracy, 'the people' and who is able to speak for them, have all been central to political debate over the last few years. The Brexit saga can be seen as a (long) sequence of different discourses on 'the people'. These peoples, however, are far from being a united and undifferentiated whole. They oppose each other on a variety of issues and seem mutually exclusive. All these different discourses on the people, nevertheless, still claim to speak for *everyone*: 'the people'.

This essay works towards a conception of representation by considering Laclau's work. The aim of the essay is twofold. Firstly, I will argue for a re-evaluation of populism. I believe that there are three important aspects of representation, which are not taken into account by the system of the representative democracies – namely: rhetoric, naming and the excess. These aspects demand certain displacements in our understanding of representation. In the first part, I will thus discuss the aforementioned notions, and demonstrate why these displacements specifically call for a re-evaluation of populism. The Brexit debate will on various occasions serve as an example for this, but the argument could apply to any populist discourse. Secondly, I want to consider in what way populism exposes certain limits of the model of representative democracies. In the second part, I will therefore argue that Laclau offers us a more productive notion of representing the people in terms of its disruptive potential against the institutional order. Lastly, I will draw my conclusions concerning our leading question, which considers how to understand the populist phenomenon and its relation to representative democracies.

The Challenges of Populism

The principle of articulation and rhetoric

One of the first principles in Laclau's work is the principle of articulation, developed with Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. As 'post-Marxists', they contend that there isn't a constitutive principle preceding the social that causes social agents to be fixed in an ultimate class core. They reject any notion of social relations as purely necessary. With Gramsci, they argue that social relations are *articulated*,

5 See: "Why Vote Leave," Vote Leave, accessed November 23, 2019, http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html.

See also: "Get the Facts," Britain Stronger in Europe, accessed November 23, 2019, https://www.strongerin.co.uk/get_the_facts#wuR5L3LWufMuu30h.97.

and that the social fabric should be considered as radically complex.⁶ The principle of articulation therefore becomes central in explaining social antagonisms, rather than class differences. If all of social reality is articulated discursively, then objectivity is constituted on the terrain of discourse. Relations are constitutive for the elements contained within the discourse. The elements do not precede the given discourse, but come into being *because of it*. Relation and objectivity are thus synonymous, according to Laclau.⁷

[W]e will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call *discourse*. The differential positions, insofar they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call *moments*. By contrast, we will call *element*, any difference that is not discursively articulated.⁸

Given the centrality and constitutive character of discourse, Laclau abandons the distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive practices. Every object

is constituted as an object of a discourse. This assertion has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought. Rather it means that every object needs to be articulated *as* a certain object. In other words, we do not create the material world as it is, but we still have to deal with it in a certain manner. A discourse therefore

Laclau thus renounces the thought/reality divide and the idea that rhetoric is a secondary meaning upon a primary literal one. Rather, he argues that rhetoric is actually constitutive for social relations.

combines linguistic as well as material elements. Laclau thus renounces the thought/reality divide and the idea that rhetoric is a secondary meaning upon a primary literal one. Rather, he argues that rhetoric is actually constitutive for social relations.⁹ Rhetorical devices such as synonymy, metonymy and metaphor are the primary tools for constructing social identities.¹⁰ As a result, the field of categories that can explain social relations is majorly increased.

6 It was Gramsci who contended that political subjects should not be solely regarded as classes, but rather as 'collective wills'. (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2014), 57, 75.)

7 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2018), 68.

8 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 91. Original emphasis.

9 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 94-96.

10 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 96.

Furthermore, a dominant articulation of the social can never become a totality. Laclau contends that a discourse may temporarily 'arrest the flow of differences', but is unable to fully fixate it. At the same time, however, there cannot be non-fixity at all, because in that case all meaning would be lost.¹¹ The transition from an element to a moment is therefore never complete, and the former becomes a 'floating signifier', which is 'incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain'.¹² A political discourse is an example of a discursive chain that tries to establish a certain relationship between elements. An element that discourses nowadays feel compelled to incorporate into their articulation is, for example, 'sustainability'. However, a certain political discourse cannot become a totality, and this particular element can possibly experience pressure from other discourses. When an element is represented (signified) by multiple chains, its specific meaning varies from discourse to discourse. Hence, the element acquires the status of a floating signifier. I will return to this notion in the next section, when I specifically discuss the populist discourse.

Some discourses are, however, more successful than others. Laclau speaks of a 'hegemonic discourse' or 'hegemony' when a particularity succeeds in becoming the representation of the whole. In presenting itself as a totality, the hegemonic discourse functions as a horizon, *not* a ground. According to Laclau, a hegemonic discourse can never fully become a totality, because it only partially fixes the elements. Moreover, a discourse is precisely able to do so, because there is not a pre-given ground (such as the economy), which determines social relations. Although discourses are in this sense 'failed totalities', they still *present* themselves as genuine ones.¹³ We could thus say that hegemony is nothing more than a generalized rhetoric.¹⁴

With the notion of hegemony as a horizon, Laclau radically opens up our understanding of the political. This notion allows him to abandon the orthodox Marxist perspective, and reject any theory that considers social relations as purely necessary.¹⁵ The hegemonic struggle, on the contrary, could be understood as a stage on which various discourses aspire to become the dominant one. If one discourse succeeds, it is at the same time the limit to what is representable.¹⁶ The political – or the political logic – exists in this tension insofar it constantly reframes the rules of the social.¹⁷ Thus, where social logics are a system of represented elements, the political logics are burdened with the institution of those elements.

11 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 98-99.

12 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 99.

13 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 70-71.

14 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 13.

15 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 71.

16 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 81.

17 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 117.

We are here dealing with a performative theory. This means the abandonment of any essentialist theory concerning the structure of the social. Instead, the social is actively structured through different articulations. This allows for a plurality of perspectives on the social to exist alongside each other. This means that the distinction between reason and rhetoric falls apart and we can therefore understand any social order in rhetorical terms:

Gone are the times when the transparency of social actors, of processes of representation, even of the presumed underlying logics of the social fabric, could be accepted unproblematically.¹⁸

This section aimed at present Laclau's starting point. Since social relations can no longer be seen as purely necessary, it seems that they are actively constructed. Various articulations aspire to become the dominant representation of the social. Moreover, representations become rhetorical devices rather than necessary and proper terms.

Now that we are clear on the basic terrain on which politics should be understood, we can analyse popular identities. However, if there is no necessary meaning fixing the social, its representations are contingent. In that case, there needs to be another mechanism at work to understand these representations. According to Laclau,

According to Laclau, a notion of 'the people' is therefore not a mere ideological expression, but instead shows a real relation between different social actors.

we should understand this as a process of signification resulting in the emergence of an 'empty signifier'. This empty signifier will, as we shall see, take the form of 'a name'. Before dealing with that, however, I must clarify how a popular identity emerges in the first place.

Popular identities and their names

Looking at populism, then, we should not set aside this widespread phenomenon just because it is rhetorical. The reconsideration of rhetorical devices allows for a different perspective (as is Laclau's intention). It is often argued that populism is vague, that it simplifies politics and that it is mere rhetoric. As we well know by now, with Laclau, we can turn this criticism on its head.¹⁹ Populism appears to stand out because it breaks with the normalized order. However, all politics is caught within articulatory practices, and politics is therefore rhetorical through and through. They 'simply'

¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau, "The Politics of Rhetoric," in *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014), 80.

¹⁹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 17-19.

chose a perspective on the social to reduce the radical complexity. This is not to say that these various articulations are completely unfounded, because they do aim to represent elements that are present in reality.

According to Laclau, a notion of 'the people' is therefore not a mere ideological expression, but instead shows a real relation between different social actors.²⁰ He contends that, when investigating the unity of a (populist) group, *demands* are the appropriate unit of analysis. He speaks of two logics operating across the social: a logic of *difference* and a logic of *equivalence*. When the logic of difference is dominant the institutional system works well enough to address the various democratic demands that are made. In this case, the demand remains at the status of a request, since the institutional system is able to absorb the request into the 'institutional/differential totality', and the demands therefore remain isolated. Should it happen that a certain institutional totality is no longer able to satisfy the demands posed to them, a relation of equivalence may be articulated between them.²¹ The demands, which first only appeared as requests, turn into claims. The transition from a request to a claim is what Laclau also denotes as the movement from a democratic demand to a popular one. Popular demands thus are unified in their opposition to the institutionalist discourse. The anti-institutionalist character is clearly present from the beginning.

If an equivalential chain emerges within the social, an antagonistic frontier is constituted dividing society into two camps: the institutional order and the unsatisfied people. In this rejection of the establishment something particularly interesting happens. The differential totality of the institutional system is broken and a partial component of the community tries to become the legitimate representation of the whole. Laclau uses the analogy of the *plebs* (the underprivileged) aspiring to be conceived as the *populus* (body of all citizens) drawing on the Roman example.²²

The antagonistic frontier should be understood as a 'strict moment of chasm'.²³ Laclau turns against the dialectical logic that holds that oppositions can be conceptually reconciled. Therefore, the moment of conflict should not be understood as an epiphenomenal expression of an underlying rational process. Antagonism, instead, should be seen as a radical frontier, which presupposes a broken space. The social is not a harmonious whole, but rather a space crisscrossed by antagonistic breaklines. According to Laclau the community thus experiences a *lack*. The fullness of the community will always be missing. Thus, antagonism is external to a discourse, since

20 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 73.

21 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 73-74, 77.

22 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 81-82.

23 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 84.

it limits the discourse from becoming a totality.²⁴ It is exactly due to this lack, that the possibility of naming that absent fullness arises.²⁵ Due to its irretrievability antagonism is deemed as constitutive.

With an antagonistic frontier dividing society in two camps, placing the unsatisfied demands on the one side and the institutional discourse on the other, the equivalential chain still only relies on a vague solidarity. For the chain to last it needs to be properly established by way of an empty signifier. The demands are then no longer merely represented as equal, but the chain is represented as a totality as such. This is what Laclau calls the 'crystallization' of the chain, which is the final condition for a popular identity.²⁶ As a result, however, the particular demands are split. On the one hand, these demands will incorporate the signified totality, but on the other hand, they will remain particularistic in their specific demand. Hence, the signifier unifying them needs to be empty precisely because there is no common feature underlying the initial demands. We are therefore dealing with emptiness, rather than with an abstraction, since the signifying process is not a conceptual operation but a performative one.²⁷

If we take this argument to be correct and briefly return to the Brexit debate, one might wonder how one should understand the relation between different articulations of the same topic. It is rarely the case in a crisis that just one group will try to rise and become the dominant speaker for the people. In reality, there are several attempts, as Brexit shows. As we know, the construction of a popular identity through the emergence of an empty signifier relies on the presence of a stable internal frontier. However, that stable frontier is constantly redrawn by different articulations. Any equivalential chain (the institutional discourse, another articulation, etc.) can enter the stage and draw a frontier. In doing so, it can pressure some of the demands originally belonging to another chain. The result is a rivalry between several discourses. The social is therefore not just divided in two antagonistic camps, but crisscrossed by multiple frontiers.

The social is therefore not just divided in two antagonistic camps, but crisscrossed by multiple frontiers.

The aforementioned notion of the floating signifier is able to illustrate the constant displacement of the internal frontier. If we, again, relate this to Brexit, we could say that we have an original empty signifier 'the autonomy of the British people' that is constructed to lobby for Brexit. The *Vote Leave* campaign argued that leaving the EU would mean that more money could be spent on housing, schools and health-

24 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 112.

25 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 85.

26 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 93.

27 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 97.

care for the British people.²⁸ In this sense, the idea was that Britain would have done more its own terms if it had left the EU. The signifier could also experience pressure from a competing chain that draws a different frontier. *Britain Stronger in Europe*, in turn, argued that Britain would have more financial security, better schooling and better healthcare (to name a few), when staying in the EU.²⁹ In this case, the argument would thus be that Britain would enjoy more autonomy, through the support of the EU. The meaning of 'the autonomy of the British people' is then suspended and called a floating signifier. According to Laclau both empty and floating signifiers should be seen as partial dimensions of any operation constructing a 'people'.³⁰

The meaning of 'the autonomy of the British people' is then suspended and called a floating signifier.

The stage, on which these various articulations present themselves, is thus constantly rebuilt. The *Vote Leave* campaign constituted the EU as its main antagonist.³¹ However, for other campaigns, that advocated to stay within the EU, such as *Britain Stronger in Europe*, the antagonist could be found within Britain itself: the ones who lobbied to leave. Consequently, the stage for the former

consisted of the whole of the EU, while the latter focussed on the UK itself. At the same time, the direct opposite could be argued as well, but that only demonstrates the validity of the claim even more.

In any case, Laclau argues that it applies to all populisms that they consist of highly heterogeneous elements, which are only unified in their frustration with the institutional system. This precarious chain of equivalence will somehow be represented by an empty signifier. By what means, however, it is able to finally crystallize still needs to be clarified. The signifier that will represent the chain cannot simply express a unity that is pre-given. On the contrary, the signifier *itself* is crucial in establishing that unity. To clarify this Laclau uses the difference between *naming* and *conceptual determination*.³² According to him, it is the act of naming that becomes 'the ground' of the chain, which means that the unity and identity of the object are the result of naming that same object.³³ Naming is therefore opposed to any conceptual

28 "Why Vote Leave," Vote Leave, accessed November 23, 2019,

http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html.

29 "Get the Facts," Britain Stronger in Europe, accessed November 23, 2019,

https://www.strongerin.co.uk/get_the_facts#wuR5L3LWufMuu30h.97.

30 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 133.

31 "Why Vote Leave," Vote Leave, accessed June 16, 2019,

http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html.

32 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 99-100.

33 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 104.

operation that relies on the abstraction of something that is already there. A name is *singular* as well as *empty*, because there is nothing commonly pre-given. The only option that remains is for one of the demands to emerge and become the dominant representation.³⁴

Since there is no logical, dialectical or semiotic reason at work to unify the demands, another power has to operate to make them actually invest in the signifier, such that it becomes their name. In Laclau's words, we know the *forms* of the signifier, but not the *force* behind them.³⁵ He states that it is clear that this investment in a name must be of the order of affect, since affect and signification are closely inter-linked. Signification is governed by affect, because it cannot be directed by a set of formal rules (anti-essentialist perspective). The name unifies as the rallying point of passionate attachments. Passions and affects therefore become much more central in explaining the investment and motivation. The status of reason, in terms of 'rational deliberation', therefore gets reworked. Whereas previously reason might have been considered the primary force of investment, we now see that affect is just as important.

The particularity that is invested in, however, is not just any particularity, but one that presents itself as universality. Firstly, this is what we previously indicated as the movement in which the *plebs* aspires to be perceived as the *populus*, and succeeds in doing so.³⁶ Secondly, it is precisely what we have called hegemony. When the name acquires a fullness, it will gain a priority over the rest of the particular demands, which means that a reversal has taken place.³⁷ This reversal points at the fact that when the particularity succeeds in becoming the dominant signifier, it then functions as the very foundation for the chain it originated from.

We are therefore confronted again with the fact that any representation is inherently contingent. Although a name is able to receive a temporal fullness, it is unable to reach the moment of being a universality. This is the result of the absence of essential relations between elements that construct the social order. It is, however, possible for a name to become the dominant representation of a chain, an articulation, and finally maybe even the whole social order. Indeed I contend that we actually see multiple interlinked names that become a dominant representation.

Take for example the institutionalist representative system, which has as its dominant signifiers 'democracy', 'equality', 'inclusiveness' and of course 'representability'. These signifiers have become hegemonic in a way: they are usually not challenged. Populist movements, however, do challenge this order, or so I would

³⁴ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 97.

³⁵ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 110.

³⁶ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 111.

³⁷ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 225.

argue. That is why 'they' are perceived as a threat to rational institutional politics, because 'they' question the acclaimed signifiers. If 'they' are successful in challenging the dominant signifiers, the situation becomes even more interesting.

Look again, for example, at *Vote Leave* who lobbied for leaving the EU. The campaign managed to *represent* various demands that were apparently not met by the institutional system. To put it very simply: if the institutional order had been fully inclusive and had represented all of its elements, the campaigns lobbying for Brexit would have never been so successful. It is therefore highly problematic to dismiss populist discourse, since they originate from real demands that were not addressed in the first place. The institutional discourse was unable to deal with them, and they were therefore denied a certain existence in the political debate, but that does not necessarily mean that they are therefore unsubstantial. Now, this is not to say that I actually believe that an institutional system can ever be fully inclusive, because I do not, but this is exactly the point. If representation is inherently contingent, it will never be able to incorporate all of the social elements into its discourse. Thus, to claim to do so, is even more harmful, I would say.

Hegemony and excess

In line with populism, I would therefore like to challenge the notion of representation as appropriated by the institutional system(s). With Laclau I am able to demonstrate the inherent contingency of *every* discourse. We can, however, make the argument even more radical. It is not only the case that every representation is contingent, but the interplay between these representations is contingent as well. In this section, I will attempt to show what exactly I mean by this.

Naming became a central notion because conceptual apprehension exceeded its limits. The previous section already briefly dealt with the role of signification in a hegemonic politics. If the field of the political is like a stage, the hegemonic (dominant) articulation is the play that is put on display. The players (names, signifiers) may vary over time, or even the whole play can change. Nevertheless, it is only that which is shown (signified) that one can have an interaction with, since the hegemonic discourse defines the horizon of what is representable. As soon as it gets off the stage, or has not entered it yet, it does not exist. As we know, hegemony is not just any representation, it is the horizon of what is representable. However, there is no essential meaning to be found in this representation and it will therefore eventually get overflowed by others.

It is not surprising that populist debates, such as Brexit, are perceived as a threat. In challenging the dominant signifiers, populism questions the very *foundations* (remember: the name(s) are essential in establishing the unity) of a hegemonic discourse. Due to the Brexit debate, the ability of Parliament, and especially the prime

minister, to speak for the people was severely questioned.³⁸ For example, during one of the biggest demonstrations in recent British history, the People's Vote March, demanded a second referendum, since they completely lost trust in whether Parliament would be able to defend their interests.³⁹

This brings us to the third and final notion displacement: the excess. The hegemonic link can - necessarily so - not be fully immanent. It has an outside which it can retrieve: the heterogeneous excess. I have mentioned before that any social order is characterized by what it is not: the lack. It is precisely due to this lack that a hegemonic politics is possible in the first place. Hegemony and excess are, in other words, the two sides of the same coin. Logically one cannot understand one without the other. Strictly speaking, the excess, as an irretrievable impossible, is thus an outside which is already inside. This is of importance for our discussion on populism and representation, for this excess is characterized as constitutive by Laclau. The representation of the chain of equivalence is consequently also characterized by an excess.

Looking at populism, then, it soon becomes clear that it is not given that every unfulfilled demand can enter a chain, for the chain does not do away with the particularity of the demands. One can imagine some would clash with others that are already part of the chain. In other words, the equivalential chain is *not* neutral in its opposition to the institutional order.⁴⁰ Furthermore, if a certain discourse finally is able to temporarily fix the social fabric then some elements are necessarily expelled from the social scene. An excess is thus 'created' which is in fact the precondition for the social to be radically open. This excess contains all elements that subvert the discourse.

The equivalential chain is therefore not only opposed to the establishment, but also to that which is unable to enter the space of representation.

The equivalential chain is therefore not only opposed to the establishment, but also to that which is unable to enter the space of representation. These are different types of opposition. The opposition between the chain and the institutional order is of an antagonistic nature, the popular identity cannot exist without its negative reference. In the case of the so-called 'heterogeneous excess', the exclusion is even more radical. Laclau claims that the excess is similar to what Lacan called the *caput mortuum*, or

38 Theresa May was prime minister while I was writing this essay. During that time a People's Vote March was organized. See: Haroon Siddique, "People's Vote march 'too big to ignore', organisers warn MPs," The Guardian, March 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/mar/24/peoples-vote-march-too-big-to-ignore-organisers-warn-mps>.

39 Siddique, "People's Vote march 'too big to ignore', organisers warn MPs."

40 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 139.

'the residue left in the tube after a chemical reaction'.⁴¹ Since that which is heterogeneous is excluded from the space of representation as such it is not even conceived of as difference, but rather not conceived of at all.⁴² Analogous to antagonism, this is precisely why heterogeneity is constitutive: because it is irretrievable. Without heterogeneity we would thus not be able to speak of antagonism either.⁴³

[T]he antagonistic frontier involves, as we have seen, a heterogeneous other which is dialectically irretrievable, [...]. In other words: the opposition A - B will never fully become A - not A. The 'B-ness' of the B will be ultimately non-dialectizable. The people will always be something more than the pure opposite of power. There is the Real of the 'people' which resists symbolic integration.⁴⁴

At this point, we can fully understand the notion of antagonism and its relation to the heterogeneous excess as we find it in Laclau. He rejects both the definitions of 'real opposition' (between real objects) and 'contradiction' (between concepts).⁴⁵ True antagonism, according to Laclau, is something else. It is not an objective relation, since antagonism is not a relation *within* the discourse, but the very limit of that objectivity. Antagonism is, therefore, not internal, but external to society.⁴⁶ This is possible, because of the excess, which is not included in any equivalential chain and therefore not represented.

From a broader perspective, however, we can see a fundamental heterogeneity, which is necessarily part of any social order. The heterogeneous excess is irretrievable: the fundamental lack of the community. Heterogeneity, in this sense, therefore does not mean difference or multiplicity, because it cannot be contained or mastered.⁴⁷ The excess therefore has an ontological status as an impossibility. It is not an outside to an inside, but an outside constituted by the inside. Strictly speaking, the excess is not an outside itself. In fact, the outside does not 'exist', except only as a lack.

In this section, I have intended to present the notion of the excess. According to Laclau it is impossible for a discourse to be fully immanent. The heterogeneous social will, in the end, always pierce through any frontier that constitutes it as an outside. We are once again confronted with the contingency of representation. We discovered rhetorical devices as the primary tools of understanding the social and the relations

41 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 140.

42 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 140.

43 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 149.

44 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 152.

45 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 109.

46 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 112.

47 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 223.

within. This led us to the process of naming, instead of conceptual apprehension, to understand these representations. However, although a name can be hegemonic, it only can be so as a horizon. Following from all this, we learned that, for those names to be truly contingent, there needed to be an excess that is dialectically irretrievable. The people are never in pure opposition to the institutional order. In that case, we would be dealing with a fully immanent system and that would entail that a dialectic vision of a unified history can be maintained.⁴⁸

Representing the people

At this point, I am able to begin formulating an answer to the original question of how to understand the populist phenomenon and its relation to representative democracies. I have argued that populism, regarding representation, presents us with three interlinked displacements. As we well know by now, these displacements concern rhetoric, names and the excess. All of them point to the same conclusion: any representation is inherently contingent. I contend that representative democracies aim to appropriate the signifiers of ‘democracy’, ‘representability’, and so on, in contrasting themselves with populism as a perverted type of politics. However, I hope to have been able to show that the emergence of a people actually challenges these very signifiers. In Laclau we thus find an initial potential of the people to challenge and sometimes even rupture the institutional order.⁴⁹

Considering Laclau’s work on populism, I would argue that we have acquired a more productive notion of representation. To disregard populism is to believe that the institutional forms of representation are sufficient. They act as if the mechanisms in place include everything - and everyone - within a democratic regime. Yet, how can one still uphold this belief in the face of the many populist ruptures we have seen over the last few years? We see a highly heterogeneous mass of people who are unsatis-

True antagonism, according to Laclau, is something else. It is not an objective relation, since antagonism is not a relation within the discourse, but the very limit of that objectivity.

⁴⁸ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 143.

⁴⁹ Although Laclau contends that the people should not be understood as they were in pure opposition of the institutional discourse, he does not develop an argument in which the people might represent themselves independently. In Laclau we find two logics operating within the social, a logic of difference (institution) and a logic of equivalence (de-institution). These logics challenge each other, but the tension between them can never be resolved. More specifically, they need each other as necessary conditions to construct the social. One can thus oppose the differential institutional logic with a logic of equivalence constructing a people. However, in ontologizing the excess, Laclau mainly focusses on the hegemonic struggle over other forms of politics.

fied. Apparently representation of all demands has failed and the acclaimed signifiers of 'inclusiveness', 'representability' and maybe even 'democracy' are contested by populism. However, since populism is itself inherently representational, it does not contest the principle of representation as such, but only the specific signifiers. With Laclau I have therefore argued that these representative democracies have overlooked the fact that they themselves are contingent representations of the social. Taking the phenomenon seriously, how should we revise our notion of democracy, its people and how to represent them?

Laclau proposes the notion of symbolic representation. According to him, the inner structure of any popular identity is essentially representative, but for Laclau this means something more than the traditional account. The most considerable problem with theories of representation is that they do not recognize the double movement

Any populist outburst results from a crisis in representation. Populism is not a perverted type of (democratic) politics, but rather its return.

present in any form of representation. 'They', instead argue that 'the will of the people' exists prior to any form of representation.⁵⁰ If one however, recognizes the inherent instability of any institutional discourse (impossible totality), one has to rethink the assumption that those represented have a pre-established will. Thus, Laclau contends that establishing any

construction of a 'people' *relies on* mechanisms of representation. A name is crucial in fixing the equivalential chain of demands. Moreover, the empty signifier only exists as a point of identification (for the other demands), *because* it represents the chain as such. There is thus a double movement at work. The empty signifier is, on the one hand, that which constitutes the totality incorporating all the demands. On the other hand, the empty signifier has to actually represent the interests of those particular demands and is itself part of the chain. It remains singular but is incapable of becoming wholly autonomous.⁵¹

Consequently, Laclau claims that the very possibility of democracy depends on the constitution of a democratic people. The objection that a particularity (a name) is then occupying the place of power, does not matter to Laclau. This particularity is only able to occupy that space if it succeeds in becoming the dominant representation through a hegemonic struggle and has therefore a legitimate claim to occupy that very

50 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 163. For a more elaborate version of this argument see: Chantal Mouffe, "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy," in *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000): 80-107.

51 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 161-162.

space⁵²: “Without production of emptiness there is no ‘people’, no populism, but no democracy either.”⁵³ Laclau thus contends that the construction of popular identity is profoundly democratic, because it is the very condition of creating a collective will.⁵⁴ If we agree with Laclau’s perspective, one could argue that the aforementioned populist ruptures (Podemos, Syriza) or debates (Brexit) pose a serious democratic question to the representative institutions. Laclau contends that any populist outburst results from a crisis in representation. Populism is not a perverted type of (democratic) politics, but rather its return. The acceptance of populism as a deeply political phenomenon, then, leads to the rethinking of rhetoric, of names and the excess. These become central notions in our understanding of politics.⁵⁵

Conclusion

This essay considered how to understand the populist phenomenon and its relation to representative democracies. Firstly, I have attempted to demonstrate that the usual objections regarding populism are largely unfounded. Populism, populist leaders and populist movements tend to be depicted as perverted types of politics as if ‘true politics’ fell prey to rhetoric and falsity. I hope to have shown, by examining examples such as the Brexit debate, that the issue of populism might be more complex than initially assumed. It is not only populism that is subjected to rhetoric, but all politics. As a result, notions such as rhetoric, names and the excess, become central in our understanding of politics in general. Our understanding of populism needs to be revised.

52 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 169-171.

53 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 169.

54 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 171.

55 With Laclau, however, we end up with a far more radical conclusion: the political logic simply *is* a populist logic. All forms of politics need to articulate a version of the people. There is no politics outside of representation. Only within the space of representation - where the hegemonic struggle takes place - is it possible to re-articulate various signifiers and actually *change* the social fabric. Laclau might be aware of the phenomenon of ‘everyday politics’ but he will not regard it as truly political, because it does not concern itself with the institution of the social. I do not disagree with Laclau that politics should concern itself with the institution of the social. However, in ontologizing the excess Laclau prioritizes hegemonic struggle over other forms of politics. That is not to say that a rupture cannot occur, but it remains fairly unclear how. Jacques Rancière gives us, for example, on this matter, a different perspective. See for further discussion: Mark Devenney, and Clare Woodford, “Logics of Revolt: Laclau and Rancière,” in *Populism: the logic of revolt or a revolt against logic?*, ed. Alexander Stagnell and David Payne. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019 (forthcoming).

In what way, then, should we understand the populist phenomenon and its relation to representative democracies? Populism confronts us with the fact that every social order is subjected to an inherent precariousness. I thus agree with Laclau that any articulation or discourse on the social is inherently contingent. As a result, I believe that the disruptive potential of the people against the institutionalized order becomes particularly clear in a populist discourse. The hegemonic signifiers, such as 'representability', 'inclusiveness' and 'democracy', can always be questioned. It would therefore be a mistake to dismiss such attempts, since they are the result of a crisis at the very heart of the institutional (established) discourse.

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Tim Miechels

“Vooral heel problematisch is de op natuurwetenschappen gebaseerde psychologie, die denkt dat we ook de mens in termen van natuur kunnen begrijpen.”

“Koffie, altijd koffie”, zegt Tim Miechels wanneer hij plaatsneemt in restaurant Het Gerecht. We treffen hem na college en stellen hem een aantal vragen over zijn onderzoek. Hij promoveert momenteel aan de afdeling fundamentele filosofie van onze faculteit, maar is bij veel studenten bekend van het onderwijs dat hij geeft in bijna alle programma’s van de opleiding Filosofie. Waar gaat zijn onderzoek eigenlijk over?

“Mijn onderzoek gaat over het begrip ‘naturalisme’: het idee dat we alles in termen van natuur kunnen begrijpen, of moeten begrijpen.” Miechels’ fascinatie voor het naturalisme stamt uit zijn studietijd, toen neurowetenschappers als Dick Swaab het hele menselijke bestaan wilden reduceren tot het brein. Publicaties als *Wij zijn ons brein* stootte hem toen al tegen het zere been. “Ik vond het werk van Swaab altijd zeer problematisch en ik was in de filosofie altijd op zoek naar een kritisch weerwoord op die vorm van naturalisme.” Meer in het bijzonder richt hij zich op de kritische houding van Edmund Husserl en Martin Heidegger ten opzichte van het naturalisme.

Welke kritische houding is dat dan? Daarvoor volgen we Miechels op zijn zoektocht door het werk van Husserl en Heidegger. Die tocht begint met een zekere nederigheid ten aanzien van de wetenschap. “Anti-wetenschappelijk zijn is in het licht van het enorme succes van de natuurwetenschappen geen serieuze positie.” Husserl begrijpt dat, maar ziet tegelijk de noodzaak de natuurwetenschappen te gronden in de menselijke ervaring. “Voor Husserl moet filosofie het fundament vormen voor wetenschap. Voor Husserl is filosofie – als fenomenologie – dé fundamentele wetenschap. Hij staat zo nog echt met één been, of twee benen misschien wel, in die traditie van de moderne filosofie die op zoek is naar vaste grond. Filosofie als moeder van de wetenschap die als fundering voor het hele bouwwerk van kennis moet fungeren. Dat is echt Husserls filosofisch project.”

Dat respect voor de verworvenheden van de wetenschap vult Husserl aan met een scherpe kritiek, legt Miechels uit: “Natuurwetenschappen zijn fundamenteel naïef,

die kunnen zichzelf of hun eigen grond niet bewijzen. Die zijn in die zin epistemologisch naïef omdat ze niet kunnen verklaren hoe wij ooit tot ware kennis kunnen komen. Ze gaan er gewoon van uit dat de wereld zoals die buiten mij is echt bestaat,

*als je de wereld gaat opvatten
als natuur. Ja, dan sta je alweer
met één been in het naturalisme.*

maar het *hoe* van die kennis kunnen ze niet begrijpen. Vooral heel problematisch is de op natuurwetenschappen gebaseerde psychologie, die denkt dat we ook de mens in termen van natuur kunnen begrijpen. Naast een episte-

mologisch probleem heeft deze vorm van psychologie ook een ontologisch probleem, want het bewustzijn is van een fundamenteel andere aard dan de natuur; het bewustzijn is nooit in termen van natuur te begrijpen.”

Toch is de kous daarmee niet af. Husserls kritiek alleen is niet genoeg om het naïeve naturalisme van iemand als Dick Swaab te pareren en daar verschijnt Heidegger in Miechels’ onderzoek. “Heidegger zegt: ‘Husserl, als jij ervan uitgaat dat mensen moeten streven naar absolute zekerheid en dat die absolute zekerheid te bereiken is, dan zie je eigenlijk een vraag over het hoofd: de vraag naar wat de mens nou eigenlijk is.’” Bij aanvang van zijn onderzoek verwachtte Miechels’ in het werk van Heidegger een zinvolle middenpositie tussen kritiekloos naturalisme en een anti-wetenschappelijke houding te vinden. Uiteindelijk blijkt daar dus veel meer te vinden, mogelijk zelfs een antwoord op de antropologische vraag.

Heideggers kritiek richt zich op Husserls mensbeeld, dat de mens als redelijk wezen voorstelt: “Een redelijk wezen verhoudt zich als kennend subject tegenover een wereld, die zich dan volgens Heidegger alleen maar als natuur – natuur als verzameling objecten – kan tonen. Terwijl Heideggers beeld van de mens, als een mens die altijd al is ingebed is in zijn wereld, ‘praktisch betrokken’ is op een wereld die altijd al betekenisvol voor ons is. Die meer primaire verhouding, van de mens als ingebed in zijn wereld, kan je nooit denken als je begint vanuit de theoretische blik. Vanuit de theoretische blik is de wereld waar je tegenover staat altijd natuur. En als je de wereld gaat opvatten als natuur. Ja, dan sta je alweer met één been in het naturalisme.” Husserl ontsnapt dus niet helemaal aan het naturalisme dat wetenschappers als Swaab voorstaan, bewust of onbewust houdt Husserl vast aan de grond van het naturalisme. Miechels kan dat wel verklaren, “Heidegger noemt dat ‘het bestaan dat vlucht voor zichzelf’. Daar bedoelt hij mee: de mens die vlucht voor de mogelijkheid dat er misschien wel helemaal geen zekere gronden voor zijn bestaan te vinden zijn.” Een reflex waar zelfs Husserl niet bestand tegen was.

Deze lijn van het naïeve natuurwetenschappelijk naturalisme, via Husserl tot aan Heidegger vormt de eerste fase van Miechels’ onderzoek. Wat wil Miechels nog meer onderzoeken? De filosoof licht, wanneer hij toegeeft dat zijn hele onderzoeksplan op de schop moest na deze eerste bevindingen. Zijn originele plan was te beginnen bij de verhouding tussen Husserl en Heidegger. Van daaruit wilde hij het vroege werk van

Heidegger induiken om Heideggers verhouding tot het naturalisme in dit vroege werk te onderzoeken. Tot slot zou het late werk van Heidegger aan bod komen, waarin Miechels op zoek wilde gaan naar een alternatief natuurconcept. De verhouding tussen Husserl en Heidegger blijkt echter veel rijker en interessanter is dan hij in eerste instantie had gedacht.

Zijn nieuwe onderzoeksplan is nog niet volledig uitgewerkt, maar voorlopig wil hij zich gaan bezighouden met Husserls *De crisis van de Europese wetenschappen*. “Wat je in *De crisis* ziet is dat Husserl bepaalde concepten introduceert waaruit blijkt dat hij zich wat heeft aangetrokken van Heideggers kritiek. Een belangrijk concept in *De crisis* is bijvoorbeeld *Lebenswelt* (levenswereld). Husserl introduceert dit concept om de wereld waarin we in onze alledaagsheid zijn ingebed waarin dingen betekenisvol zijn, te denken. En dat was nou precies Heideggers kritiek: dat je die wereld vanuit Husserls streng theoretische blik niet kon denken.”

We zijn geprikkeld en vragen ons af of de bebaarde metafysicus leestips voor ons heeft. Over leestips voor het werk van Husserl hoeft Miechels niet lang na te denken: “*Filosofie als strenge wetenschap* is een redelijk korte tekst van Husserl, geschreven voor een min of meer breed publiek zonder al teveel jargon. Een goed beginpunt.” Wat betreft Heidegger twijfelt Miechels wat langer. Hij legt uit dat al het werk van Heidegger ontoegankelijk is. Daarom raadt hij aan om te beginnen met Herbert Dreyfus’ introductie op *Sein und Zeit*. Dreyfus is dé grote Heidegger expert in de Verenigde Staten en heeft naast deze introductie ook een collegereeks gegeven over Heidegger die op Youtube te vinden is. “Wat vooral helpt is het feit dat je Dreyfus in die colleges steeds hoort worstelen met Heideggers denken, steeds onzeker is en steeds in discussie is met zijn studenten. Dat maakt het heel sympathiek. De ervaring van Heidegger lezen is altijd een worsteling en het helpt heel erg om te horen dat Dreyfus zelf ook worstelt.”



Manufacturing Authenticity

How we yearn for the real and fall for the fake

Martijn Visser

Let's be honest: we all crave authenticity. More than ever, our contemporary society and culture is characterized by a longing for the real, unique, sincere, pure, natural and genuine. Think of the following randomly selected phenomena: the recent revival of vinyl, polaroid and similar analogue technologies; our obsession with organic, biologically and locally grown eco- and superfoods; the omnipresence of homebrewed beers and IPAs in the supermarkets; the real 'Himalayan' salt and water we even find in the average middleclass kitchens; minimalist fixie bikes and longboards; vintage clothing and ripped jeans; slow coffee and 'the natural wine movement'; the immense popularity of *vlogs*, *Snapchat*, *Instagram* and similar media that promise you a glimpse into the real life of real people; brutally honest politicians as Trump and Bolsonaro who seem to owe their popularity for a great deal to their 'authentic' personalities. On the other hand we see the emergence of identity politics that focuses on the discrepancy between the 'true identity' of certain minority groups and its suppression by society at large. Last but not least think about the backpacking holiday almost every soul-searching millennial undertakes in search of authentic experiences: we want to taste the real food, meet the real locals, listen to the real language and experience real nature. We want to encounter the real foreign, often with the purpose of finding and expressing our true inner selves.

Once it has been seen, it cannot be unseen: we find the ideal of authenticity and authentic experiences literally everywhere. All the aforementioned phenomena – and the list could have been much longer – are designed, staged and strived after in order to still our hunger for 'realness'. They all evoke a sense or feeling of authenticity, be it in their directness and immediacy (analogue technology), their naturalness and pureness (eco-food and drinks) or their honesty and frankness (social media and politicians). At the same time, however, there is a blatant paradox at work in all these examples. Our desire for the real appears to be satisfied with *manufactured authenticity*, and more often than not with intentions we usually do not associate with authenticity at all: making money or winning votes, or both. Hence, there seems to be an economy of authenticity at work that renders the inauthentic 'authentic' in order to satisfy a demand that is apparently easily fooled with a fake substitute. Ironically, most of us seem to be aware of this: we all *know* that Trump, Instagram and carefully planned surprise and adventure holidays are anything but real. Yet, we *experience* this authenticity nonetheless and it seems to satisfy a demand that somehow is *really* there. How should we understand this odd tension between the authentic and inauthentic? The concept of authenticity has a very long and complicated history – ranging from Shakespeare's ancient verse 'to thine own self be true' to Kanye West's recent tweet 'don't trade your authenticity for approval' – and great philosophers and poets have written libraries full about the term, bickering about what it exactly means or whether

it means anything at all. Although this versatile tradition has influenced the way we think about authenticity today in the most various ways, we cannot possibly discuss it here in its full scope and depth. We will, however, touch upon an intellectual leitmotif that is relevant for the question where our modern day demand for authenticity comes from, in what peculiar way it is satisfied and consumed, and how we experience the authentic in our everyday lives.

Since we are speaking in terms of demand, supply and consumption, it will be no surprise that we need to take a look at the socio-economical history of the West for an answer to our questions. In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello show very convincingly how the notion of authenticity with which we are dealing here is intimately linked with the emergence of an industrial society.¹ The sudden rise of mass production in the second half of the 19th century, as a result of the mechanization of the production process, and the invention and implementation of the assembly line, led to a standardization of both products and people on a scale that was never seen before. Hence, from the Industrial Revolution onwards, authenticity has been used mainly as a *critical concept* to protest against the immense uniformity and conformism that was a direct result of these developments.

Indeed, from that moment on, every series of products that rolled off the production line looked exactly the same, had to be used in the same manner and satisfied the exact same demand. Moreover, not only the factory worker became completely interchangeable insofar as he turned quite literally into a part of the machinery where his individual skills or know-how was no longer needed, but the consumer himself became also part of a standardized and uniform mass as well. The expansion of the capitalist market, accompanied by the advent of advertising and the development of a consumerist society in the beginning of the 20th century made everyone wear the same clothes, have the same haircuts, drive the same cars, listen to the same music, watch the same movies and think the same thoughts. In other words, the massification of products was accompanied by a standardization of desires, which entailed a widespread destruction of all difference between human beings as such.

At the end of the 19th and throughout much of the 20th century, this rise of the 'mass society' and its concomitant loss of individuality was critiqued and commented upon by many different thinkers. In order to illustrate how widespread this criticism was, we will make a short stroll through this intellectual history and highlight some of its main protagonists.

Marx was of course one of the first to analyse the consequences of this industrialized massification. He famously lamented the deplorable state of the factory worker who became completely alienated from himself and his fellow-workers because of his repetitive and stultifying labour. Around the same time, political philosopher

1 Boltanski & Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Verso 2007. See in particular chapter 7: *The Test of the Artistic Critique* (p. 419-482).

De Tocqueville discussed the ‘tyranny of the majority’ that was, according to him, an inevitable result and necessary evil of democratic regimes that hold equality and freedom as their highest values. Somewhat later, the sociologist Durkheim pointed out how the disappearance of traditional societal structures and an increasing individualization within society made the people – paradoxically – more vulnerable for mass manipulation. In a very similar vein, the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset sketched in his *The Revolt of the Masses* a fairly bleak picture of the emergence of the mass-man who obeyed blindly to the only relevant rule in such a mass-society: ‘to be different is to be indecent’ – conformism became the sacred ideal of modern man.²

We find a similar critique within existentialist philosophy, albeit now from the perspective of the individual that is directly linked to the ideal of an ‘authentic live’ as opposed to that of the mass-man. Already Kierkegaard spoke during the first half of the 19th century of the dangers of an ‘amorph mass’ and an ‘anonymous people’ that absorbs every individual and renders

it into ‘a third person’. In the 20th century, this theme was taken up again by German and French existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre. All of them stressed the impor-

*‘To be different is to be indecent’
– conformism became the
sacred ideal of modern man.*

tance of leading an authentic life: affirm your individual freedom, accept the responsibility to determine your own life without letting it be determined by other people, and confront yourself with the existential angst that necessarily follows therefrom. To put it in a corny way, stay true to yourself and become who you really are.

In the course of the 20th century, both perspectives – the economic and political commentary upon this emerging mass society on the one hand and the existential point of view that emphasised the importance of leading an authentic life on the other hand – can be found back in the Critical Theory of the *Frankfurter Schule*.³ Dazzling analyses of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin and many others tried to reveal how the political and economic structures of our capitalist consumer society oppressed the individual without him being aware of it. They argued that capitalism had learned its 19th century lessons and continued to suppress and exploit the people, but now in such a way that they were being presented the *illusion* of individuality

2 It must be noted that almost all of these sociological and economical critiques are at least partially inspired by the writings of German romanticist thinkers. See for example Schillers 6th letter from *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* for a striking ‘Marxist’ analysis of labour, alienation, and individuality, dating from 1793(!).

3 Although Adorno wrote a very well-known critique of the existentialist and especially Heideggerian concept of authenticity (see his *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*), it is my assumption that in the end both existentialism and critical theory addressed similar problems, albeit from different perspectives.

and freedom. After all, the long working hours seemed to be compensated with some free time in the weekends, in which you could spend your well-earned salary on a seemingly infinite amount of consumer goods or watch 500+ different channels on your television. What more freedom could you possibly desire?⁴

The critical theorists argued that this kind of freedom exists only insofar as capitalism allows for it. It is mediated by and wholly dependent upon an economical system of supply and demand that grants its existence solely to an ever increasing accumulation of capital, which must be accompanied by a simultaneous expansion and exploitation of the market if it wants to survive. The 'free' choices you make and the products you buy are to a large extent determined by this market, which needs you, the consumer, to be as similar as possible to all the other consumers for an efficient production, sale and economic growth. Capitalism had adjusted itself to the early critique of the physical exploitation and estrangement of the worker by enslaving people no longer to the assembly line but to the products they buy. The possibility

of a constant satisfaction of desires became a new opiate of the people and its hallucination of freedom and happiness paralysed every kind of resistance and critique.

This criticism against capitalism and consumerism became more and more prevalent during the 1960's and reached its peak during the student protests of 1968. The intellectual guru of this movement

Marcuse explained with his concept of 'repressive tolerance' how any critique of this system would be incorporated and neutralised by the system itself.

was Marcuse and his book *One-Dimensional Man* became a surprising bestseller. It described how a capitalist mass-society reduced the various dimensions of human existence to only one: consumption. People work, eat and sleep in order to consume. Their whole identity seems to be based around this sole principle: *I consume, therefore I am*. Or even better: *I am what I buy*. The book was thus a grave charge against a society that made any form of authentic existence impossible. Very importantly, Marcuse explained with his concept of 'repressive tolerance' how any critique of this system would be incorporated and neutralised by the system itself, insofar as it could be rephrased into a demand that the market could subsequently satisfy. According to this logic, any critique on consumption eventually becomes a consumable product itself and is thereby rendered ineffective and powerless.

Ironically, it is exactly this fate that would befall the capitalist critique of the 60's, as it was rephrased into a demand for individuality and difference, in short into *a demand for authenticity*. A good example of this is the increasing interest in 'green consumerism' and eco-products in the 70's and 80's. At the time, lots of companies were afraid that

4 For a beautiful and accessible example of this way of thinking see Adorno's essay on free time (*Freizeit*).

their sales would come to a standstill because their products were deemed unhealthy or polluting by environmental organisations. This panic quickly turned into optimism when they discovered that this critique actually opened up a whole new market with clients willing to pay even more for products that were branded and sold as (but were not really) eco-friendly and natural. For a rather staggering illustration that these companies did not beat around the bush, we can give the example of the aptly titled book *The Environmental Marketing Imperative: Strategies for Transforming Environmental Commitment into a Competitive Advantage* (1994), where we find the very honest statement: “It’s the greatest new business opportunity of this century,’ people said. What could be easier? Turning clean, green deeds into big green bucks?”⁵

A quick search through the business section of the Amazon bookstore shows a recent proliferation of similar management and economy books. They all try to explain that we, the consumers, want authentic products and experiences, and that they, the businesses, need to present themselves and their products as genuine and authentic as possible in order to meet this demand. Again, these books really do call a spade a spade. Take a look at the following telling titles: *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (2007); *Building Brand Authenticity* (2009); *All Marketers Are Liars. The Underground Classic That Explains How Marketing Really Works – and Why Authenticity is the Best Marketing of All* (2012); *Authenticity: The Head, Heart and Soul of Selling. Discover a New World of Sales Power* (2014); *The Art of Authenticity: Tools to Become an Authentic Leader and Your Best Self* (2016); *Outrageous Authenticity. You Are Your Best Sales Weapon* (2016).

Interestingly, almost all these books open with the very honest disclaimer that there is no such thing as ‘real’ authenticity, but that it all boils down to somehow artificially imbue your products with this peculiar and magical quality. For an example as how this might be done, we can take a brief look at the first book I mentioned, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*, written by the two renowned Harvard economists James Gilmore and Joseph Pine. They distinguish between five ‘genres’ of authenticity – natural, original, exceptional, referential and influential – and give very helpful advice, in the form of catchy slogans, to render your products authentic depending on the kind of authenticity you want to evoke.⁶

Do you want your product to have a ‘natural’ feel? Then *stress materiality, leave it raw, reek rusticity, be bare and go green*. One only need to think of the average minimalist interior of a downtown hipster restaurant to know that this works really well: the seemingly self-made raw wooden tables and wobbly chairs, the bare light-bulbs hanging from the industrial ceiling, the houseplants that make the place look like an ‘urban jungle’ and the handwritten menu stating that their products are locally

5 Cited in: Boltanski & Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 477.

6 See in particular chapter 4 (*Rendering Authenticity*) of: Pine & Gilmore, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press 2007.

grown in the backyard: it all screams authenticity. But maybe you want to evoke a more 'original' feeling? Then *stress your firsts, revive the past, look old, mix and mash* and *anti-up*. The (not so) surprising polaroid renaissance is exemplary for this category, with their rather clumsy and retro looking pastel-coloured photo cameras.

Two more examples: the traditional *Italian* restaurant we find *all around the globe*, with its black-and-white pictures of old Italian movie stars eating spaghetti, the 'very typical' basic red-and-white checked tablecloths and staff that speaks with an Italian accent (or, if you're very lucky, speaks only Italian); and the 'Dutch' cheese stores you find everywhere in Amsterdam nowadays, with names written on their shop-windows in supposedly 17th century typefaces and where well-groomed bearded men in flannel shirts sell you *Old Amsterdam Cheese*, which is neither very old nor from Amsterdam. Both examples are beautiful combinations of what Pine and Gilmore call *referential* and *exceptional* authenticity: they want to *evoke a time and place, and be foreign, direct and unique*.

All these examples demonstrate that capitalist enterprises turned authenticity very consciously into a *product* or, as they call it in economical jargon, a *commodity*. A closer look at this process – the commodification of authenticity – brings to light the deeply paradoxical structure of this phenomenon. As Boltanski and Chiapello explain, 'the authentic' is actually associated with that which lies *outside* the sphere

of commodities and capital: a product is deemed authentic when it has an original and intrinsic value that is disclosed in the individual and unique relationship with its owner. In other words, all products that are mass-produced with the intention of making money –

Hence, when capitalism eagerly tapped into this demand for authenticity it gave itself the impossible task to commodify difference, that is, to produce difference on a mass-scale.

with an exchange-value instead of a use-value – are automatically seen as inauthentic. After all, it is very difficult to develop a *unique* relationship with a *mass-product*. This brings again the fundamental tension between *difference* and *uniformity* to light – authentic means first and foremost: differentiated from the uniform mass.

Hence, when capitalism eagerly tapped into this demand for authenticity – driven by its relentless imperative to transform noncapital into capital – it gave itself the impossible task to *commodify difference*, that is, to produce *difference* on a *mass-scale*. In doing this, capitalism ran into its own limits insofar as it tried to commodify that which was inherently bound to get lost in the process of commodification. Therefore, the incorporation and neutralization of the critique of capitalism from the standpoint of authenticity is in a way a self-defeating process: the consumer, who can only be

fooled so long, will eventually find this out and get disillusioned, with ‘rapid cycles of infatuation and disappointment’ as a result, ultimately leading to “a new era of suspicion,” as Boltanski and Chiapello call it.⁷

This disappointment is easily recognizable in the tourist who found out that her unique and life changing journey was preceded and followed by thousands of others in the exact same way, a feeling that is all too often converted into an ironic and cynical attitude the moment she is confronted with this fact. After all, *playing* a tourist, while laughing at the naiveté of the other *real* tourists, makes you really stand apart from the mass. In a similar way, we simply ‘adore’ shitty B movies and trashy music – but never without the almighty inverted commas that showcase our detached and superior ironic stance. At the same time, the disappointment that precedes this irony is real and fuels a growing suspicion against consumer goods, advertisements, companies and social media at large. In such a society, every *intention* of being authentic, honest, genuine and sincere becomes very suspect and irony becomes the default attitude to deal with this uncertainty.

A beautiful case study of this dynamic is the phenomenon of Lana Del Rey, one of the most famous present-day popstars and a perfect example of our longing for authenticity.⁸ One only need to listen to one of her songs to know why: backed up by soft synthesizers and an acoustic piano or guitar, she sings in a sultry and sighing voice about all her personal sorrow and the burdensome emotional life of a struggling young American woman: every song wants you to wallow in self-pity and misery. This grotesque sentimentality is further illustrated in her nostalgic videoclips where we see Del Rey in heavily filtered shots and dressed in retro clothes walking lonely through Los Angeles or staring through a window into the void, mulling over a lost love. In short: everything about Lana Del Rey tries to sell you the idea of authenticity, of *real emotions*, and there is not one grain of irony in this imago.

At first, this bothers us, because we know that everything about this imago is carefully constructed and thus utterly fake: her looks (botox and fillers), her background history (not self-made but completely financed by her extremely rich dad), and even her name (she was born as Elizabeth Grant). Hence, it is no surprise that the start of Del Rey’s career prompted a rampant ‘Lana Del Ray backlash’ on social media: she became one of the most *hated* artists around and fans were genuinely *disillusioned* when they found out about her artificial identity. However, this public hatred completely turned around the moment she started to embrace her fake façade and *exaggerated* this artificial authenticity. Her second album was actually

7 Boltanski & Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 446.

8 This example was brought under my attention by a brisk and smart essay on Lana Del Rays ‘authentic inauthenticity’ in the Dutch magazine *Vrij Nederland* by Doortje Smithuijsen, who analyses this phenomenon in a very similar way, although she settles on a different conclusion, see: <https://www.vn.nl/lanadelrey/>.

praised for its 'synthetic nostalgia' and what was first seen as ridiculously pretentious now became a sincere simulacrum. Our suspicion turned into ironic playfulness and it was suddenly accepted again to play Lana Del Ray at a party and 'like' her music.

We might be tempted to understand this shift from naivete, towards suspicion and culminating into irony as a redefinition of authenticity in terms of the *intention* behind the product, instead of the product itself. We accept Del Rays corny kitsch when

Our suspicion turned into ironic playfulness and it was suddenly accepted again to play Lana Del Ray at a party and 'like' her music.

we find out she does not really have the intention of making profound art, but just wants to capitalize on our need for instant melancholic moods and sepia-coloured video-clips. Our appreciation for such authentic inauthenticity can lead to

the absurd but recognizable preference for the real fake over the fake real: the phony, kitsch and camp are at least honest in their inauthenticity and thus, in a sense, more real than everything and everybody that desperately makes a futile attempt to be 'really' real. Proof that this is no exaggeration can be found in the immense popularity of *The Venetian* in Las Vegas or the elegant Chinese replicas of Parisian *quartiers*, often with a perfectly duplicated Eiffel tower: why would you go to the 'real' thing if you could go to a cheaper, friendlier, and cleaner version nearby?

However, although Boltanski and Chiapello do indeed observe this redefinition of the demand for authenticity in terms of intentions as an advanced phase in the critique on the destruction of difference in our mass-society, we already noted above that our suspicion is also – today maybe even primarily – directed at these intentions themselves.⁹ It might be true that there are still some areas where we appreciate genuine intentions, especially in our personal relations, but within the public domain we find it increasingly difficult to distinguish and recognize any form of sincerity. This in turn fosters again our disappointment, irony, cynicism and suspicion, which ultimately can lead to a complete indifference towards any form of authenticity as such.

In this situation of indifference, disinterest and inertia – which we have not yet reached, but we are definitely on our way – it is neither the product, nor the intention behind the product, but the complete *lack of any intention to connect or reconnect with reality* that we long for. It is a detachment from reality, a lack of any engagement which resembles our very own ironic *modus vivendi*, that becomes the very thing we strive after. As Boltanski and Chiapello observe, the demand for authenticity becomes

9 Other examples might be our omnipresent suspicion regarding the 'well-intended' raisings of charity funds, every kind of outspoken idealist ambition of a company that is supposedly 'not aimed at making money', the 'genuinely' expressed concern of politicians for the public interest, or any other form of real 'altruism'.

at this stage more and more “anachronistic, even ridiculous.”¹⁰ As a result, the ideal of authenticity will ultimately collapse into its total opposite, which is not the *fake* that still bears an essential (negative) relation to reality, but the *simulacrum* that does not refer to any original reality whatsoever. It is not necessary to immerse ourselves in Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality and simulacra to see how our very desire for authenticity has produced its own antithesis – and it does not look like we are heading for an *Aufhebung* very soon.

This reversal has in addition alarming consequences for the critical function that the concept of authenticity once characterised: whereas the ideal of authenticity used to prompt an outspoken engagement with reality insofar as it implied a critique of the *status quo*, a paralyzing indifference that refrains from any engagement will consequently become critically crippled or downright impotent. This withdrawal from any critical confrontation can lead to a passive resignation and acceptance with how things stand.¹¹ Such a detached attitude will only allow for a very impoverished form of criticism that is not so much directed at socio-economic problems or political policy, but only at other people who dare to bother us with their different views and opinions, that is, at people who in all earnest *do* try to engage and confront. In such a society, self-mockery, one’s ability to relativize and an antisocial form of tolerance that equals the imperative to leave everyone’s filter bubble intact are seen as a virtue, whereas any form of serious engagement is regarded a vice. After all, *why so serious?*

Now, of course, we will not turn immediately into passive zombies the moment we don’t care anymore about authenticity, and one could argue that a little bit of irony and self-mockery surely won’t lead straight into apolitical apathy. Moreover, doesn’t this whole analysis itself attest to the suspicion and scepticism it attempts to criticize? Why can’t we just listen to Lana Del Ray, eat organic food, and indulge in retro fashion and analogue photography? Is this theorizing about such personal and subjective tastes not doomed to fail? Why spoil all the fun with speculative analyses in which all of our behaviour suddenly acquires a hidden meaning and motivation of which we are not aware at all? And how does this whole theory of our supposed indifference ties in with our current obsession with authenticity which we diagnosed at the outset of this essay? Is that not quite contradictory?

Against all this, it can be said that philosophy sometimes needs to provide alternative and far-reaching narratives, employing coherent and convincing arguments to put the *status quo* into question or cast our current predicament in a different

10 Boltanski & Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 453.

11 The recent explosion of stoic self-help books and our obsession with meditation and mindfulness can hardly be called surprising in this regard. For an interesting critique of mindfulness as a practice which stifles activism and makes people feel responsible for their own stress and other mental illnesses see Ronald Purser *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (2019).

light. As one of its most principled tasks, philosophy questions the most common and ordinary phenomena we take for granted in our everyday lives, and at the same time interprets these phenomena in new ways, forging syntheses and bestowing meaning where we expect it the least. To some, this activity might seem suspicious or even threatening – and in a way, philosophers truly are the masters of suspicion – to others as downright ridiculous and a waste of money and time. However, both anger and laughter – which have established themselves since Plato’s dialogues as the privileged reaction to the provocative philosopher – are an easy flight from what philosophy is all about: a most serious and thorough attempt to confront and engage.

In this essay, I have made such an attempt with the phenomenon of authenticity and our longing for the real, which indeed seems to have resulted in some seemingly contradictory conclusions. *Seemingly*, because there is a very clear and rational logic at work in the commodification of authenticity and its different cultural manifestations, our shifting attitudes towards and concomitant redefinition of authenticity, the final collapse of interest and concern for any authenticity at the limits of this commodification process, and the ultimate desire for a detachment from reality, a disengagement with potentially wide ranging consequences, as a soothing last resort – a flight into everyone’s sterile hyperreal bubble which serves as a relieving palliative and might entice at the most ironic laughter or annoyed anger, but certainly no creative and provocative thinking.

For now, however, we still seem obsessed with experiencing the authentic in as many ways as possible and in a surprisingly similar way as everybody else. Not very much unlike the early 1900’s, we wear the same clothes, have the same haircuts, drive the same cars, listen to the same music, watch the same movies, make the same travels and think the same thoughts. This time, however, they are all ‘authentic’ clothes, haircuts, cars, music, movies, travels and thoughts. This time, we are more than ever convinced that we do find and express our true unique individual inner selves, almost to the extent that it becomes pathological. However, this compulsive concern for authenticity and truth might actually be a sign that times are changing. Baudrillard expected a “panic-stricken production of the real” right before we would be confronted with a total “implosion of meaning,” and his characterisation of this panic seems to fit our time and age in an uncanny way:

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared.¹²

12 Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017, p. 6-7.

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Authentic Stupidity or Stupid Authenticity

Adorno against Heidegger's stupid 'They'

Senne van den Berg

Theodor W. Adorno's 1964 essay *The Jargon of Authenticity*¹ is presented by the author as a philosophical critique of the language which is used by the German existentialist philosophers of his day. Adorno dubs this language the 'jargon of authenticity,' and locates this jargon in the thought of, among others, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, O. F. Bollnow, and, most prominently, Martin Heidegger. Adorno claims that the jargon of authenticity is highly problematic and paradoxical and that it has spread around like a social disease: the jargon is not only used in academic philosophy, but also in society.² However, *The Jargon* has also been received as "one of the most excoriating polemics he, [Adorno] ever wrote"³. In *The Jargon*, Adorno extensively discusses and criticizes Heidegger's (in)famous distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity. In this paper, I will try to show that Adorno's critique of Heidegger can be understood as an accusation of stupidity towards Heidegger's notion of authenticity, reversing Heidegger's suggestion that inauthenticity is stupid. I will also try to clarify the way in which Adorno formulates an answer to Heidegger's 'stupid' distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity, wherein the former does not escape a distinction completely.

To be able to undertake this, some preliminary work is needed. For this, I will discuss Heidegger's thought on inauthenticity and the 'They' in *Being and Time*, for this is a section in which Heidegger's understanding of (in)authenticity comes to the fore, and Adorno also discusses the 'They' in *The Jargon of Authenticity*. After that, through Robert Musil's⁴ and Avital Ronell's⁵ discussions of stupidity, I will argue that the 'They' can be understood as being stupid according to Heidegger. Then, I will discuss Adorno's problems with Heidegger's distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity, and argue that, with Adorno's critique, it can be claimed that not the Heideggerian 'inauthentics' can be considered stupid, but rather the 'authentics.' In

1 Originally published as: Theodor W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit: Zur deutschen Ideologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1964). In this paper, I use the 1973 English translation: Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

2 Gerry Stahl, "The Jargon of Authenticity: An Introduction to a Marxist Critique of Heidegger," *boundary 2*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter 1975): 489-498.

3 Martin Jay, "Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno's Critique of Genuineness," *New German Critique*, No. 97 (Winter 2006), 16.

4 Robert Musil, "On Stupidity," in *Essays, Addresses, Precision and Soul*, ed. and trans. B. Pike and D.S. Luft (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 268-286.

5 Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 63-93.

conclusion, I will show that despite his distrust of the notion of authenticity, Adorno still offers an understanding of authenticity, which differs drastically from that of Heidegger, and could even be said to be inauthentic in terms of Heidegger's thought.

Heidegger's 'They': inauthenticity

The notions of authenticity ('*Eigentlichkeit*') and inauthenticity ('*Uneigentlichkeit*') are used quite extensively by Heidegger in *Being and Time* and play an important role in his 1927 magnum opus. A section in *Being and Time* where the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity plays an explicitly important role⁶, called "The Everyday Being of the There and the Falling Prey of Da-sein," Heidegger discusses authenticity and inauthenticity in the context of Da-sein's being-in-the-world. According to Heidegger, an analysis of the 'everyday being' of Da-sein (its 'everydayness') is important, because Da-sein first and foremost finds itself in this everydayness, in the 'They': "[...] Da-sein initially and for the most part is immersed in the they and mastered by it. Is not Da-sein, as thrown being in the world, initially thrown into the publicness of the they? And what else does this publicness mean than the specific disclosedness of the they?"⁷

Through analysing this primordial way of being-in-the-world of Da-sein, in which it finds itself within the 'They', Heidegger wants to be able to exhibit the phenomenon of thrownness in its existential concreteness. Furthermore, Heidegger thus clarifies that this analysis of the being of the 'They' serves an ontological goal: namely, to be able to formulate what an authentic being-in-the-world of Da-sein consists in. As said, this is only possible through an understanding of the way in which Da-sein, as a thrown being-in-the-world, finds itself primordially, and an understanding of the disclosedness of the world that goes with it. Heidegger distances himself from any possible moral and/or socio-cultural claims:

What is initially required is to make visible the disclosedness of the they, that is, the everyday mode of being of discourse, sight, and interpretation, in specific phenomena. With regard to these, the remark may not be superfluous that our interpretation has purely ontological intention and is far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Da-sein and from the aspirations of a 'philosophy of culture.'⁸

Adorno, does not take Heidegger's word for granted and does detect some kind of a moralizing critique in Heidegger's analysis of the 'They,' but more on this in a later stage.

6 More precisely, in part B of chapter five: this is section 35 up to section 38. In this part B of chapter five.

7 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 156.

8 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 156.

What is relevant to the endeavour in this paper, is the way in which Heidegger characterizes the (inauthentic) being-in-the-world of the 'They.' The 'They' is characterized as that in which Da-sein always already finds itself in its being-in-the-world, and characteristics of the 'They' are 'idle talk,' curiosity and ambiguity. Heidegger claims that Da-sein is in some way entangled in this everydayness of the 'They' and the interpretation of the world that belongs to it:

Da-sein is initially and in certain limits constantly entrusted to this interpretedness that directs and apportions the possibilities of the average understanding and the attunement belonging to it. In the totality of its articulated contexts of signification, expression preserves an understanding of the disclosed world and thus equiprimordially an understanding of the Mitda-sein of the others and of one's own being-in.⁹

According to Heidegger, although Da-sein finds itself first and foremost in the 'They', it closes off the possibility of an authentic being-in-the-world of Da-sein. Heidegger elaborates on this explicitly when he discusses idle talk. In idle talk ('*das Gerede*'), for Heidegger, nothing is understood but merely approached superficially: "In the language that is spoken [...], there already lies an average intelligibility; and in accordance with this intelligibility, the discourse communicated can be understood to a large extent without the listener coming to a being toward what is talked about in discourse so as to have a primordial understanding of it."¹⁰ In idle talk, the 'focus' is not on the beings that are talked about but rather on *what* is said about those beings in the discourse, the focus is one the being in question *as* something that is spoken about:

One understands not so much the beings talked about, but one does listen to what is spoken about as such. This is understood, what is talked about is understood, only approximately and superficially. One means the same thing because it is in the same averageness that we have a common understanding of what is said.¹¹

Idle talk is being kept alive by 'gossiping' and 'passing the word along,' and because of this, it acquires an authoritative character: "Things are so because one says so."¹² It is through this idle talk that the everyday being-in-the-world of Da-sein, the 'They,' interprets and discloses the world in a particular way. As said, according to Heidegger

⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 157.

¹⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 157.

¹¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 157.

¹² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 158.

the way in which this takes place within the 'They' is problematic: "Idle talk, which everyone can snatch up, not only divests us of the task of genuine understanding, but develops an indifferent intelligibility for which nothing is closed off any longer."¹³ On the same page, Heidegger sarcastically, though tellingly, remarks: "[...] the average understanding [...], it understands everything."

Heidegger acknowledges that discourse itself belongs to the "essential constitution of being of Da-sein," and that the "interpretedness of idle talk has always already settled itself down in Da-sein" because Da-sein firstly finds itself in the everydayness of the 'They,' but the danger of an inauthentic being-in-the-world of Da-sein is precisely found in this everydayness, in the 'They.' Specifically regarding idle talk, Heidegger states:

Discourse, which belongs to the essential constitution of Da-sein, and also constitutes its disclosedness, has the possibility of becoming idle talk, and as such of not really keeping being-in-the-world open in an articulated understanding, but of closing it off and covering over innerworldly beings. To do this, one need not aim to deceive. Idle talk does not have the kind of being of consciously passing off something as something else. The fact that one has said something groundlessly and then passes it along is in further retelling sufficient to turn disclosing around into a closing off. For what is said is initially always understood as 'saying,' that is, as discovering. Thus, by its very nature, idle talk is a closing off since it omits going back to the foundation of what is being talked about.¹⁴

At the end of section 35 on idle talk, Heidegger stresses that his argument is concerned with ontology, and specifies the (ontological) danger that lingers in the 'They.' In these closing comments, Heidegger is more explicit on the inauthenticity of the 'They,' when claiming that idle talk cuts Da-sein off from the genuine, or authentic, relations of being toward the world:

Idle talk, which closes off in the way we described, is the mode of being of the uprooted understanding of Da-sein. However, it does not occur as the objectively present condition of something objectively present, but it is existentially uprooted, and this uprooting is constant. Ontologically, this means that when Da-sein maintains itself in idle talk, it is – as being-in-the-world – cut off from the primary and primordially genuine relations of being toward the world, toward Mitda-sein, toward being-in itself. It keeps itself in suspension and yet in doing so it is still always together with the 'world,' with the

13 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 158.

14 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 158.

others, and toward itself. Only those beings whose disclosedness is constituted by attuned and understanding discourse, that is, who are in this ontological constitution their there, who are 'in-the-world,' have the possibility of being of such uprooting which, far from constituting a nonbeing of Da-sein, rather constitutes its most everyday and stubborn 'reality.'¹⁵

Heidegger thus argues that a Da-sein which *maintains* itself only in the 'They' its idle talk¹⁶, it's an inauthentic (being-in-the-world of) Da-sein. Heidegger also shortly points at where genuine, authentic understanding comes from: "All genuine understanding, interpreting and communication, rediscovery and new appropriation come about in it [idle talk, SvdB] and out of it and against it." For Heidegger, the (ontological) problem is not the Da-sein that *comes* from the 'They,' but it is the Da-sein which merely and only *stays* there, despite Heidegger's own disclaimer, the taste of morality is not that far away here.

In the following sections of part B of *Being and Time*'s chapter 5, Heidegger formulates similar thoughts on curiosity and ambiguity, as being characteristics of the being-in-the-world of the 'They'. There, idle talk regularly comes to the fore as that in which those characteristics show themselves.¹⁷ For Heidegger, idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity are interconnected, and they "characterize the way in which Da-sein is its 'there,' the disclosedness of being-in-the-world, in an everyday way."¹⁸ In section 38, called 'Falling Prey and Thrownness,' Heidegger elaborates more precisely on the inauthenticity of Da-sein in the 'They.' Heidegger argues that the everyday entanglement of Da-sein has the characteristic of absorption: Da-sein is absorbed by the world, and this absorption "mostly has the character of being lost in the publicness of the they".¹⁹ Heidegger argues that this absorption is a 'falling prey' to the world and inauthentic – and again stresses that the argument is strictly ontological:

Heidegger argues that this absorption is a 'falling prey' to the world and inauthentic - and again stresses that the argument is strictly ontological.

As an authentic potentiality for being a self, Da-sein has initially always already fallen away from itself and fallen prey to the 'world.' Falling prey to the 'world' means being absorbed in being-with-one-another as it is guided by idle talk,

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 165.

¹⁶ Or idle writing, 'scribbling' as Heidegger calls it. Cf. *Being and Time*, 158.

¹⁷ Also see: *Being and Time*, 177: "Idle talk discloses to Da-sein [...] everywhere and nowhere."

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164.

curiosity and ambiguity. What we called the inauthenticity of Da-sein may now be defined more precisely through the interpretation of falling prey. But inauthentic and non-authentic by no means signify 'not really,' as if Da-sein utterly lost its being in this kind of being. Inauthenticity does not mean anything like no-longer-being-in-the-world, but rather it constitutes precisely a distinctive kind of being-in-the-world which is completely taken in by the world and the Mitda-sein of the others in the they. Not-being-its-self functions as a positive possibility of beings which are absorbed in a world, essentially taking care of that world. This nonbeing must be conceived as the kind of being of Da-sein nearest to it and in which it mostly maintains itself. Thus neither must the entanglement of Da-sein be interpreted as a 'fall' from a purer and higher 'primordial condition.'²⁰

Da-sein's inclination towards (or the temptation of) this inauthenticity, Heidegger argues, is found in the tranquilization that it brings with it. Maintaining oneself in the 'They' is tranquilizing, because the 'They' supposes that one is leading and sustaining a life that is full and genuine. The 'They' falsely supposes that their being-in-the-world is authentic and genuine. Heidegger: "Entangled being-in-the-world, tempting itself, is at the same time *tranquilizing*. [...] Entangled being-in-the-world is not only tempting and tranquilizing, it is at the same time *alienating*."²¹ This results in the entanglement of Da-sein in itself, Da-sein coincides with itself. Heidegger calls this the 'plunge' of Da-sein, the plunge into inauthentic everydayness:

The phenomena pointed out of temptation, tranquillizing, alienation, and self-entangling (entanglement) characterize the specific kind of being of falling prey. We call this kind of 'movement' of Da-sein in its own being the plunge. Da-sein plunges out of itself into itself, into the groundlessness and nothingness of inauthentic everydayness. But this plunge remains concealed from it by the way things have been publicly interpreted [the 'They,' SvdB] so that it is interpreted as 'getting ahead' and 'living concretely.'²²

In his analysis of the inauthentic everyday being-in-the-world of Da-sein – in laying bare the being of Da-sein's 'there' – as it reveals itself in the 'They,' Heidegger wants to obtain the "phenomenal basis" for a "comprehensive' interpretation" of Da-sein's

20 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164.

21 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 166.

22 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 166-167.

authentic being, namely “the being of Da-sein as care.”²³ This basis is needed, because Heidegger remarks that: “[...] *authentic* existence is nothing which hovers over entangled everydayness, but is essentially only a modified grasp of everydayness.”²⁴

Now that Heidegger’s characterization of the inauthentic everydayness of the ‘They’ has been clarified, the next step is that of stupidity.

Stupidity: Robert Musil and Avital Ronell

Stupidity is a complicated and slippery notion. What does stupidity mean? Is the accusation of stupidity a moral reproach? Is it an intellectual reproach? Who, or what, is stupid? Robert Musil starts his 1937 lecture “On Stupidity” with the words: “Anyone who presumes to speak about stupidity today runs the risk of coming to grief.”²⁵ Despite its slipperiness, I would like to formulate in the following sections a certain ‘understanding’ of stupidity through which Heidegger’s ‘They’ can be characterized as being stupid – a characterization that Heidegger himself (perhaps consciously) avoids. In this undertaking, my inspiration comes from Avital Ronell, who, in her book *Stupidity*, explicitly connects Heidegger’s ‘They’ with stupidity by remarking that “it is [...] difficult to evade the suggestion that the They, *das Man*, is stupid”. Ronell also in some way connects Musil’s considerations on stupidity with Heidegger’s ‘They,’ which accounts for Musil’s presence in this section. Taking up Ronell’s suggestion that the ‘They’ can be considered as being stupid, I will first discuss Musil’s lecture and the here relevant considerations on stupidity, then discuss Ronell’s aforementioned considerations on Heidegger’s ‘They,’ before giving an account of the ‘They’ understood as being stupid.

Musil and stupidity

In his lecture “On Stupidity,” Robert Musil ventures to formulate an answer to the question: “Just what *is* stupidity?”²⁶ Regarding this venture, Ronell remarks:

For Musil, the study of stupidity remained preliminary and provisional, and indeed, one might offer that such an inquiry can attain only provisional status, as stupidity, having fragile borders, eludes comprehensiveness. Musil’s essay is conceived as an experiment, an urgent juncture in a writer’s experience of self-testing.”²⁷

23 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 168.

24 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 167.

25 Musil, “On Stupidity,” 268.

26 Musil, “On Stupidity,” 268.

27 Ronell, *Stupidity*, 77.

Despite Musil's venture being provisional and preliminary, there are certain suggestions and considerations regarding stupidity in his lecture that resemble the way in which Heidegger characterizes the 'They.' Although Musil is cautious regarding stupidity (he confesses his Achilles' heel quite early in the lecture: he doesn't know what stupidity is²⁸) there is still a preliminary formulation or approximation of stupidity to be found in his lecture. It is that formulation which, together with Ronell's considerations, will point us toward Heidegger's 'They.'

Throughout his lecture, Musil struggles with the notion of stupidity. This already starts quite early, when he considers the danger that is related to the topic of stupidity. According to Musil, this is related to the domination that stupidity has over us. He remarks that this domination reveals itself in the way people react to a 'trusted,' considered wise, person when the latter calls the "monster" of stupidity by its name and tries to conjure it.²⁹ Musil not only (apparently) experienced this himself, but also discovered the "historical validity" of his suspicion through another lecture on stupidity from 1866 that was sent to him by a friend:

Its author was J.E. Erdmann, the pupil of Hegel and professor at the University of Halle. This lecture, which is called "On Stupidity," starts right off with the report that even when it was announced it was greeted with laughter. Having discovered that this can happen even to a Hegelian, I am convinced that there are peculiar circumstances connected with people who demonstrate such an attitude toward those who wish to speak about stupidity, and I find myself quite insecure in the face of my conviction that I have provoked powerful and deeply ambivalent psychological forces.³⁰

It is clear that Musil is aware of the danger that surrounds the topic of stupidity, and the (disguised) fear that it could provoke in people when someone wishes to speak

*Stupidity in some way is inherent
to, or connected with, life.*

about it in all seriousness. Directly after the reference to J.E. Erdmann, Musil confesses his already mentioned Achilles' heel: he claims he does

not know what stupidity is. Because of his Achilles' heel, he continues his lecture by emphasizing the way in which he will approach the notion of stupidity, namely through modesty. It is precisely this 'modest' and provisional concept of stupidity that Musil offers, which is relevant to the endeavour in this paper.

Musil claims that he has not found any 'world-saving' theories of stupidity, no scientific investigations that have stupidity as their subject, nor a unanimous concep-

28 Musil, "On Stupidity," 270.

29 Musil, "On Stupidity," 269.

30 Musil, "On Stupidity," 269-270.

tualization of stupidity.³¹ However, this does not mean that putting together a notion of stupidity – or formulating an answer to what stupidity is – is not important. Musil claims that stupidity in some way is inherent to, or connected with, life: “There is, nevertheless, more than a little attraction in putting together such a notion, and answering as soberly as possible a question as basic as this one, which is preliminary to all life.”³² For this reason, Musil wants to formulate an answer to the question “what stupidity might *really* be – not how it makes a show of itself.”³³ Musil remarks that he tried to do this by tracking down the word ‘stupid’ and its relatives, writing down the common examples, and correlating his findings. However, this was as confusing as chasing butterflies, and Musil remarks that “it will not be such an easy matter to find a single hat covering all of them of which one could say: This hat *really* belongs to a blockhead.”³⁴

Musil: stupidity and the significant

Despite his remark on the difficulty of finding a ‘one-size-fits-all hat,’ Musil still seems to offer an understanding of the notion of stupidity that tries to be such a hat, and which is relevant in relation to Heidegger’s ‘They’. Musil’s formulation comes (unsurprisingly) towards the end of his lecture, after he has discussed several insufficient and unsatisfying attempts to define what stupidity is. The dangerous form of stupidity that Musil warns for is a stupidity that has nothing to do with “being a little weak in the head”, which Musil calls ‘honorable stupidity’, but is rather a sign of intelligence³⁵. “The higher, pretentious form of stupidity stands only too often in crass opposition to this honorable form. It is not so much lack of intelligence as failure of intelligence, for the reason that it presumes to accomplishments to which it has no right [...]”.³⁶

For Musil, it is this pretentious stupidity which is the real ‘disease of culture.’ This stupidity is too ambitious: it aims at targets which are inadequate, which are not suited for it – and it fails to moderate this ambitiousness. This stupidity constantly aims too high and is essentially linked to a lack of sensitivity for that which is significant. Musil argues that the significant is “the opposite of both stupidity and brutality.”³⁷ He admits that he does not give an indication of how to recognize what is significant, but this leads him to “the most important weapon against stupidity: modesty.”³⁸

31 Musil modestly remarks here that this could have also been the fault of his own ignorance. See:

Musil, “On Stupidity,” 270.

32 Musil, “On Stupidity,” 270.

33 Musil, “On Stupidity,” 270.

34 Musil, “On Stupidity,” 270.

35 Musil, “On Stupidity,” 282.

36 Musil, “On Stupidity,” 283.

37 Musil, “On Stupidity,” 286.

38 Musil, “On Stupidity,” 286.

It is through modesty and humility that we can come to recognize what is significant. Ronell remarks that Musil's considerations on stupidity are concerned with morality: "The thought on stupidity offers Musil a way to initiate a moral exhortation to a nation heading toward an unprecedented deployment of world-historical brutality".³⁹ The year is 1937: the historical context is clear.

Musil's notion of stupidity is provisional and seems to be a little general, but still: precisely pretentious stupidity as the lack of sensitivity for what is significant, Musil's advice of modesty, and the moral component of Musil's thought on stupidity move us in the direction of Heidegger's 'They.'

Ronell: the stupid 'They'

Avital Ronell explicitly links the 'They' to stupidity. In the chapter "The Politics of Stupidity," from her book *Stupidity*, she remarks that it is "difficult to evade the suggestion that the They, *das Man*, is stupid."⁴⁰ More sharply, she claims that "the problem of stupidity can be considered in existential gradations in light of *Uneigentlichkeit* (inauthenticity)."⁴¹ Heidegger, writes Ronell, "never stoops to stupidity," although he seems to hint at hit in "the fumbings of *das Man*."⁴² Ronell refers to Jean-Luc Nancy in claiming that the 'They' can be considered stupid, as the latter calls it '*abruti*,' or 'blockheaded', which goes with Musil's remark on the blockhead's hat.

In what way can the 'They' be considered stupid according to Ronell? The suggestion of stupidity in the 'They' is found in the idea that the 'They' is "stupid [...], misunderstanding destiny, 'mediocre' (as Heidegger says), if *das Man* doesn't let destiny unfold and decide its own authenticity."⁴³ Ronell's argument is that *if* the 'They' is stupid, this says something about experience and existence itself. In Heidegger, the 'They' is the everyday being-in-the-world in which *Da-sein* finds itself, it is its 'basic' mode of existence, and authenticity in some way comes 'out of' inauthenticity, Heidegger's claims this himself. Through this, Ronell tries to formulate the idea that there might be something inherently stupid about existence itself – but this is not the point of *this* paper. However, she also remarks something that is quite relevant for the endeavour of this paper:

Nonetheless, *Dasein*'s precomprehension of being [which 'comes from' the 'They,' SvdB] is more or less dumbfounded. As Nancy writes of Heidegger: "It is perhaps possible to say, however, that it is a comprehension that is 'entirely stupid.'" Primal understanding comprehends everything; but it also compre-

39 Ronell, *Stupidity*, 79.

40 Ronell, *Stupidity*, 74.

41 Ronell, *Stupidity*, 73-74.

42 Ronell, *Stupidity*, 74.

43 Ronell, *Stupidity*, 74.

hends nothing. It does and does not comprehend itself, tripping up on itself, confounded by that which it is meant to comprehend. [...] Geworfenheit, understood as thrownness, is the incontrovertible mediocrity of average understanding.⁴⁴

Heidegger's stupid 'They'

In these reflections on Heidegger's 'They' by Ronell and Heidegger's own thought regarding the 'They', the characteristics of stupidity as formulated by Musil become visible. The 'They' can be considered to be stupid in a pretentious way, for it becomes clear that for Heidegger, the 'They' has a lack of sensitivity for what is significant: it is not concerned with the 'genuine relations of being toward the world,' but engages for example in idle talk. In this idle talk, it is shown that the 'They' believes that it comprehends everything, but actually comprehends nothing, and through this it trips up on itself, as Ronell remarks. Here, it becomes clear that the 'They' aims for targets that are too high, is too ambitious and immodest (how can one comprehend everything?) and is unable to moderate this. Despite Heidegger's own disclaimer⁴⁵ of strictly being concerned with ontology, we can put together an interpretation of the 'They' as being stupid (also according to Heidegger) through suggestions and ideas by Musil and Ronell. Implicitly, Heidegger might have considered the 'They' (a herd, mass culture) to be stupid in a Musilean way, inauthenticity as stupidity.

Now, this brings us to Adorno, who precisely turns this around and claims that not Heidegger's inauthenticity is stupid, but rather his authenticity.

Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity*: against Heidegger's authenticity

In his 1964 essay *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Theodor W. Adorno gives a critique of what he calls the 'jargon of authenticity.' In the opening words of his 1975 review of the book, Gerry Stahl formulates Adorno's aim very clearly: "The jargon of authenticity is a social disease and Adorno has set out to exterminate it."⁴⁶ *Jargon*, which was supposed to be a part of *Negative Dialectics*, became a separate work because of the size of Adorno's critique.⁴⁷ Apart from being a critique of the jargon Adorno despises, *Jargon* is one of Adorno's definitive statements regarding (and against) Heidegger. Adorno targets Heidegger as one of the main proponents of the jargon, and elaborates on the problems he has with the latter's philosophy of authenticity. I will try to show

⁴⁴ Ronell, *Stupidity*, 74.

⁴⁵ The fact that Heidegger had to make this disclaimer at all, is in some way already telling.

⁴⁶ Stahl, "The Jargon," 489.

⁴⁷ Stahl, "The Jargon," 494.

that Adorno's critique can be understood as reversing Heidegger's stupid 'They' as it was characterized in the previous section, which entails that Adorno claims that not Heidegger's inauthenticity is stupid, but his authenticity.

The jargon

It has become clear that Adorno has fundamental problems with the jargon of authenticity, and this is one of the reasons why he engages with Heidegger head-on in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (something he had 'postponed' for some time). But what are Adorno's problems with the jargon? Adorno realizes that the jargon appears to be irresistible in his present-day Germany, but in his foreword to *Jargon* he claims that the jargon is "actually weak and sickly."⁴⁸ According to Adorno, existentialist thinkers like Karl Jaspers, Otto Friedrich Bollnow and Martin Heidegger – members of a circle that was sarcastically dubbed "The Authentic Ones"⁴⁹ – advocate a language, a jargon, which Adorno characterizes as ideology. Adorno, being a member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, claims that the jargon of existentialist philosophy "is the ideology complementary to that which the status quo imposes on those who have no power over it, and whose claim is therefore hollow in advance."⁵⁰ Crucial to Adorno is that the jargon has no eye for socio-historical and societal elements that impact one's life so fundamentally, but rather substitute it with an aura (Walter Benjamin) of empty words:

Adorno's book analyzes this process whereby the concepts of the jargon manage to give the pretense of dealing radically with the crucial issues of life, society and philosophy, while they merely substitute the aura of connotation-laden words for the required content. Their false appearance has, according to Adorno, led to the surprising appeal of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and of the existentialism it encouraged.⁵¹

The jargon of "connotation-laden words" includes existentialist core terms like 'commitment,' 'encounter,' 'genuine,' and 'autonomy'. These words that circle around the notion of authenticity, have, according to Adorno, a very peculiar and paradoxical result:

The stereotypes of the jargon of authenticity support and reassure subjective movement. They seem to guarantee that one is not doing what in fact he is doing – bleating with the crowd – simply by virtue of his using those stereo-

48 Adorno, *Jargon*, XXII.

49 Adorno, *Jargon*, 4.

50 Adorno, *Jargon*, 15.

51 Stahl, "The Jargon," 490.

types to guarantee that one has achieved it all himself, as an unmistakably free person. The formal gesture of autonomy replaces the content of autonomy. Bombastically, it is called commitment, but it is heteronomously borrowed.⁵²

The jargon puts too much power into the subject, through an illusory autonomy⁵³, but this merely disguises the ‘bleating with the crowd.’ Further, Adorno accuses the jargon of “historical obliviousness:” the jargon presents their categories, their notions, as if they have an ahistorical validity that is unconnected to any socio-historical, societal, and material elements. “[...] Heidegger, according to Adorno’s account, like Husserl before him, has in fact failed to deal adequately with the complexities involved in grasping the concrete.”⁵⁴ Adorno’s head-on confrontation with Heidegger comes relatively late in his essay (page 90) but concretizes his critique of the jargon. Therefore, the rest of this section will focus specifically on Adorno’s critique of Heidegger – and more specifically on Heidegger’s ‘They.’

The fundamental problem that Adorno has with Heidegger and with the jargon of authenticity, is that it withdraws itself into abstractness.

Adorno versus Heidegger

The fundamental problem that Adorno has with Heidegger, and with the jargon of authenticity, is that it withdraws itself into abstractness, this ties to the already mentioned historical obliviousness. The only historical awareness that the jargon has, according to Adorno, is that it connected to the so-called ‘Zeitgeist.’ Before starting his explicit exposé on Heidegger, Adorno remarks:

[...] the jargon adapts itself to the need for a philosophy which was current in about 1925. This was a philosophy that strove for the concretization of experience, thought, and behaviour in the midst of a total state of affairs which oriented itself according to something abstract – according to exchange [cf. capitalist society, SvdB]. For this reason, the jargon is neither able nor willing to concretize the elements which condemn it to abstractness. The jargon turns into a circle. It wants to be immediately concrete without sliding into mere facticity.⁵⁵

⁵² Adorno, *Jargon*, 18.

⁵³ Jay, “The Stigma of Inauthenticity,” 25.

⁵⁴ Stahl, “The Jargon,” 494.

⁵⁵ Adorno, *Jargon*, 92-93.

Adorno starts his explicit confrontation with Heidegger by claiming this abstractness of the jargon is found in the paired concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity as found in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. According to Adorno, the jargon's striving is already paired with a "hands-off attitude."⁵⁶ Adorno compares Heidegger to a certain Reinhold, who Hegel accused of thinking from a "pure and disgusting height."⁵⁷ Adorno:

Like Reinhold, Heidegger cannot get enough of the ritual preliminaries for the "step into the temple," although hardly anyone nowadays dares to tie a warning bell around the cat's neck. Heidegger is by no means incomprehensible, as one might gather from the marginalia of the positivists, but he lays around himself the taboo that any understanding of him would simultaneously be falsification. The impossibility of saving what this thinking wants to save is cleverly turned into its own life element. This thinking refuses all content which would have to be argued against.⁵⁸

Stahl clarifies that the fundamental philosophical difference between Adorno and Heidegger lies in their reaction to post-Hegelian philosophy. Adorno radicalizes Hegel's dialectic, "redefining it in terms of the non-identity of word and object and articulating the mediations involved more thoroughly than even Hegel," it is Heidegger who is 'falling behind Hegel' in reacting "too simplistically to the dilemmas of post-Hegelian philosophy, attempting to skirt the problem of a non-idealistic mediation of subject and object, of thought and society, of theory and practice."⁵⁹ The result of Adorno's reproach does not remain in the sphere of theoretical philosophy:

This theoretical point has practical consequences for Heidegger's philosophy in that he fails to reflect on the relation of his language to society. Heidegger's failure to deal adequately with the present social context of philosophy is perhaps Adorno's strongest indictment of him: Heidegger's ontology is an unfortunate response to social conditions in which men feel powerless. [...] it fetishizes the illusion of powerlessness and thereby serves those in power. [...] Strengthening conservative ideology, Heidegger's approach avoids those issues which point to the realm of society, an arena in which men could possibly exert some joint control.⁶⁰

56 Adorno, *Jargon*, 93.

57 Adorno, *Jargon*, 93.

58 Adorno, *Jargon*, 93.

59 Stahl, "The Jargon," 495.

60 Stahl, "The Jargon," 495.

Adorno claims that Heidegger's classification of the 'They' as inauthentic does not make sense. Heidegger seems to be missing the point. This primal understanding of the 'They' which Heidegger classifies as inauthentic "is as much a part of, as not, of that which fundamental ontology [Heidegger] despises as culture. Culture includes even the material infrastructure of society, in which human work and thought are rooted, and the only means by which work becomes real societal work."⁶¹ The bigger problem, however, is found in Heidegger's authenticity. Adorno clarifies this in the attitude towards that the authentic has, the (in)famous authentic '*Sein-zum-Tode*:'

The partisan of authenticity commits the same sin of which he accuses the *minores gentes*, the lesser people, of the They. By means of the authenticity of death as he flees from it. Whatever announces itself as "higher" than mere empirical certainty, in this attitude, falsely cleanses death from its misery and stench – from being an animalistic kicking of the bucket. This cleansing occurs in the same manner as a Wagnerian love- or salvation-death. All this is similar to the integration of death into hygiene, of which Heidegger accuses the inauthentic. By means of that which is kept silent in the high stylization of death, Heidegger becomes an accomplice of what is horrible in death.⁶²

In this "metaphysics of death," as Adorno names it, this sublimation of death by those who are frightened to be 'betrayed' by their own life, all the evil from bourgeois society comes together.⁶³ About this authentic '*Sein-zum-Tode*,' Adorno remarks that it "underhandedly becomes a mode of behavior. Thus it becomes what Being-unto-death did not want to be [...]," which is inauthentic.⁶⁴

From the hereabove it can be concluded that Adorno in some way reverses the stupidity of Heidegger's 'They.' It is not the 'They' which is stupid in a Musilean way, but rather the 'authentic' and their jargon are. The 'authentic' have a lack of sensitivity for the significant, for they in no way deal with the pressing elements of human life: the socio-historical, societal, and material elements. They replace the concern for

61 Adorno, *Jargon*, 98.

62 Adorno, *Jargon*, 156.

63 Adorno, *Jargon*, 155-156.: "Death is sublimated because of a blinded drive for self-preservation: its terror is part of the sublimation. In a life that is no longer disfigured, that no longer prohibits, in a life that would no longer cheat men out of their dues – in such a life men would probably no longer have to hope, in vain, that this life would after all give them what it had so far refused. For the same reason they would not have to fear so greatly that they would lose this life, no matter how deeply this fear had been ingrained in them. From the fact that men sublimate death, one cannot conclude that death itself is authentic. Heidegger is least of all in a position to do this, as he is careful not to attribute authenticity to people who do not sublimate death."

64 Adorno, *Jargon*, 158.

the latter elements with a connotation-laden jargon, so that the ‘concrete’ elements disappear from sight – thus supporting, according to Adorno, conservative ideology and the status quo. The immodesty and ‘immoderate ambitiousness’ of the authenticity is found in their historical obliviousness, they present their jargon and concepts as if they have an ahistorical value and were unmediated by any of the aforementioned ‘concrete’ elements. Thus, for Adorno it is not inauthenticity which is stupid, but authenticity as presented by the German existential philosophers and their jargon, and specifically by Heidegger.⁶⁵

Adorno’s authenticity

In his article “Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno’s Critique of Genuineness”, Martin Jay argues that, despite of Adorno’s rejection of Heidegger’s notion of authenticity, he does not get rid of it completely. This shows that, despite rejecting Heidegger’s notion of authenticity, Adorno could not shake the notion completely. Jay states: As we know, however, he [Adorno] was rarely content simply to denounce a position from the vantage point of its binary opposite [...].⁶⁶ By shortly describing Adorno’s ‘substitute’ for the Heideggerian authenticity, I would like to give Adorno a positive voice rather than only the voice of rejection.

Jay remarks the following:

The ideological notion of authenticity, attacked in aphorism 99 [Minima Moralia, SvdB] and The Jargon of Authenticity, is based on a dangerous search for ultimate origins as legitimizing fictions, a mistaken reification of the individual as self-possessed monad and of the transfer of cultish notions of aura from religion to art, philosophy, and everyday human existence. It evokes the myth of autochthonous rootedness to denigrate the wanders condemned to permanent exile.⁶⁷

Adorno, who was in exile himself during and after WWII, rather proposes another understanding of authenticity, according to Jay. An authenticity that is supported by Walter Benjamin’s mimetic thinking from *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. It

[...] harks back to Benjamin’s celebration of the mimetic faculty, which is evident in the technologically reproduced mass culture that Adorno so

65 In explicating Adorno’s critique, I have not focused on the validity of Adorno’s interpretation of Heidegger, for this was not the focus of this paper. However, e.g. Gerry Stahl offers some comments on Adorno’s interpretation of the Black Forest’s thinker. See: Stahl, “The Jargon,” 495-496.

66 Jay, “The Stigma of Inauthenticity,” 26.

67 Jay, “The Stigma of Inauthenticity,” 29.

often distrusted. In this context, authenticity paradoxically means accepting and even valorizing the necessary inauthenticity of the self, which is always dependent on the other, always in relation to the outside, always insufficiently integrated into a coherent and boundaried unit. To repeat the key sentences of aphorism 99: “Anything that does not wish to wither should rather take on itself the stigma of the inauthentic. For it lives on in the mimetic heritage.”⁶⁸

For Adorno, on the contrary of Heidegger, the imitation of the society in which one finds itself is essential to authenticity. One cannot ignore the fact that what one knows, learns, and does, depends on a ‘mimetic heritage’. To ignore that, is according to Adorno, stupid. However, this Adornian authenticity is not the *same* as Heideggerian inauthenticity:

This version of mimetic relationality is not, however, a capitulation to the exchange principle, for it knows that imitation is not perfectly equivalent, that mirroring is not simple duplication. It provides an alternative both to the absolute commensurability of exchange and to the absolute singularity of the jargon of authenticity.⁶⁹

Concluding

In this paper, I have tried to show that, through Musil and Ronell, Heidegger’s ‘They’ can be understood as being stupid (stupid inauthenticity?). I have then argued that Adorno reverses this, and precisely accuses Heideggerian authenticity of stupidity (a stupid authenticity?). Then, I have briefly showed that Adorno did not get rid of the notion of authenticity completely, but substituted it for a more mimetic understanding (authenticity in inauthenticity? Or perhaps, with Heidegger, an authentic stupidity?). Paul de Man once wrote: “to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic.” But what about stupidity?

The ‘authentic’ have a lack of sensitivity for the significant, for they in no way deal with the pressing elements of human life.

⁶⁸ Jay, “The Stigma of Inauthenticity,” 29.

⁶⁹ Jay, “The Stigma of Inauthenticity,” 29.





Christoph Lüthy

The One with a Swiss Dean and a Bottle of Wine

I have been wanting to write this interview for quite a long time. Everything started because Ted, one of our editors, told me (attention, SPOILER ALERT!) about an alleged piece of advice that Christoph Lüthy, professor in the History of Philosophy and Science at Radboud University and dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, gave to Matt Damon (who, fortunately, didn't follow it) and to some scones-eating British politician (who, unfortunately, didn't follow it). This was the rumor I had been waiting for, but then the summer holidays arrived, the Italian seaside distracted me, the new semester started, and all sorts of things every student is familiar with happened. Like a good bottle of Brunello di Montalcino that you save for special occasions, this interview had been put on hold, waiting for the best moment to be written. And it was still there waiting when the familiar voice of the interviewee himself greeted me with a lively "Buongiorno!" in the koffiehoeck (15th floor of the Erasmus Building, the place to be for every philosopher in Nijmegen). The day to open that metaphorical bottle of Brunello di Montalcino had been set, but I needed some insights from one of the persons who knows prof. Lüthy best, namely his wife Carla Rita Palmerino, professor of the History of Philosophy at Radboud University and program coordinator of the Research Master in Philosophy. And no, if you were thinking about a love blossomed within the Erasmusgebouw's walls, you would be mistaken. Their love blossomed in a way more romantic (but equally cold and foggy) setting, in dear old Scotland, as they recently revealed in an interview with VOX.

Prof. Lüthy welcomes me on a quite misty Friday afternoon in his office on the 15th floor, where he moved at the beginning of his dean-journey three years ago and that he proudly defines as "one of the most beautiful offices of the building". Not only do the large windows make it very luminous, but from here he can also see the city and a very exceptional Dutch landscape with hills and forests, whose leaves are of particularly beautiful warm colors in the fall. While going through my questions, I realize that I don't actually know what dean-life looks like. Maybe moved only by personal curiosity

or maybe also by the genuine thought that there are others out there who would like to know it, I bashfully ask about the beginning of his mandate as a dean. “I certainly didn’t apply for it” – prof. Lüthy promptly answers – “because I don’t consider myself a natural leader. I also have to admit that in the past I used to look down on faculty administrators assuming they were failed academics. I was asked to do it because two trajectories somehow merged. On the one hand, there was a search committee, which asked all professors for their input. On the other hand, there is always the executive board that also comes up with a wish list. My reasons for accepting were twofold:

I admit that it is flattering to be asked and so I thought about giving it a shot, although no one had trained me for this job.

I admit that it is flattering to be asked and so I thought about giving it a shot, although no one had trained me for this job. The other reason was that at the time we had a University President who was once again considering the option of merging our Faculty with the Faculty

of Arts. This scenario would be quite disadvantageous for us, so I accepted on condition that the independence of our faculty would be guaranteed.”

He then goes on telling me about his first struggles and what he had to get used to. For instance, the fact that for the first time in his life he had an electronic agenda mostly filled in by a *secretariaat*. Unexpectedly, he now found his life booked up by others. Therefore, sometimes when he sees four hours free on his agenda, he blocks them just to have the time to read a dissertation or clean up his inbox.

This reminds me of an interview with Michelle Obama, in which she talks about her husband and about the fact that, while most people feel drained because of so much stress in their lives, some other people (like Barack) get energy from stress. “Hmm – I start thinking – in which one of the two categories does Lüthy belong? The Barack-category or the stress-eating, stress-sleep-deprivation, stress-one-million-negative-consequences one?”

“Well, again, I wasn’t trained to do this.” He pensively comments. “When I started, there were many dossiers I wasn’t acquainted with. For example, as a dean of this faculty I am also on the governing board of the *Docenten Academie* (Teachers’ Academy), and I just didn’t know anything about it. In the beginning, I also felt stressed, because formally, the dean bears the ‘final responsibility’ for teaching, research, and finances, and I imagined that I needed to know the details of all three. Moreover, most of the university affairs work in cycles: there are certain things that need to be done each year, while others have four- or five-year cycles. Sometimes, several cycles coincide within a single month, and if this happens in a period when I am also teaching, or a student of mine completes a dissertation, then this also adds a good deal of stress.” He thinks a bit and continues. “Another thing that struck me in the beginning was that while I used to be reliable and punctual, this now turned out to be simply not possible at times. Because of that, I often felt very guilty until I

learned to deal with the fact that sometimes there are people who have to wait for me. But despite all of this, this function is also rewarding and beautiful. It is also easier than I expected, because this faculty is functioning very well, and the financial situation is healthy, so we are in the position to encourage good initiatives and promising projects.”

“Oh I’ve heard about last week’s visitation!” I say enthusiastically thinking about what my friend Frank told me about it [*note that the interview was recorded on November, 1*]. “As far as I know, it went pretty well!”

“Yes, they were satisfied, absolutely!” Prof. Lüthy replies cracking a smile. “We are a good research institute, and they were happy with most of our research centers. I am particularly happy about the visitation’s results because we hear everywhere, especially in the national press, about how difficult it is for the humanities to survive. Given the general climate we seem to be doing the right thing.”

However, I can’t help but keep ruminating on the crazy agenda of the person sitting in front of me. To my knowledge, there is just one person who is able to fit so many activities in her calendar. This person is Hermione Granger and even she cannot do it without the magic help of the Time-Turner. So how can prof. Lüthy, lacking any magic device, find time to do his own research? He honestly admits that he doesn’t have much time to write his own articles. He still manages to write one or two per year, but he devotes most of his research-time to looking after and encouraging his PhD students.

“What do you like so much about that?” I ask. “I learn so much from them,” he answers. “For instance, a PhD student of mine, Lyke de Vries, has just sent to the manuscript committee her dissertation about a very mysterious group in the 17th century called the *Rosicrucians* [*whose founder, Christian Rosenkreuz, is said to have lived for 106 years*] and I learned things that I wouldn’t have learned without her. The previous dissertation, written by Dr. Sanne Stuur, was about the interactions between Einstein and philosophers at the beginning of the 20th century, and about the debate over which profession, the philosophers or the physicists, are responsible for the notion of time. Again, this was something I hadn’t previously known much about and that interested me a lot.”

All this work of course implies that there is less free time than one would like to have. Prof. Palmerino told me this summer that her husband really likes to play the piano. But I guess it is quite difficult to practice when the only possibility to play is in the evening and either one doesn’t have the energy to do that, or has to prepare for next day’s meetings, or just has neighbors who would not appreciate some piano music at 11pm. When asked about whether this weighs on him, prof. Lüthy replies “No, this is a good thing about having offices and functions that rotate. It is a phase of my life. I came to terms with the fact that I will only manage to read the Camilleri’s books [*if you are not familiar with Italian literature, Camilleri was the famous writer*]

who narrated the vicissitudes of *Inspector Montalbano*] during the summer holidays, but that for the period of my deanship, I won't be able to keep up with contemporary Dutch literature or do much sports."

The word "sports" catches my attention. I am not sure about whether the idea of the typical intellectual as someone who spends his/her days locked in the library is just a Leopardian reminiscence or whether there is some truth to it, but I am actually interested in finding out which sports achievements might be hidden beneath the philosophical surface.

"I used to row a lot, I think it was the only sport in which I was ever good," prof. Lüthy states in a slightly auto-ironic tone. "I learned how to row on the Rhine in Basel, where the Rhine makes a 90° turn, so it accelerates. To row back upstream in that curve, between the tugboats that come along, is really difficult, and so I developed a good technique. When I went to study in Oxford I was put in one of their boats as the stroke, which is the oarsman who sets the rhythm for the whole boat, and I had the same role also when I went to the States. Unfortunately, I couldn't compete in the top boats, like the one that does the Oxford-Cambridge race on the Thames, as I am at least 15 cm too short for that."

There is something I am missing. Here I am, in the Netherlands, sitting in front a professor who I know as being Swiss, who speaks to me in perfect English, although usually we talk to each other in Italian, who has studied in Oxford and then went to the States. I need a bit of clarity here.

"Wait, when did you go to England actually?"

"When I was twenty."

"For your bachelor?"

"Uh-huh," he nods.

"Why didn't you stay in Switzerland?" I insist, thinking that Switzerland looks like quite a nice place to live, with its mountains and green spaces and delicious chocolate (we all know this has a huge impact on the quality of life).

"I hated Switzerland to the depths of my heart after having done military service and I just wanted to get out of it. There is a sense of self-righteousness about Switzerland, the idea that *we* are better than all those other chaotic countries around us, a shared feeling that I found suffocating as a youth. I needed oxygen, I knew I wanted to do philosophy but since that wasn't part of the program in my high school, I didn't know where to go. Thus, I simply went to ask someone I trusted, and this person told me that in England there was a strong..."; he stops, chuckles, and adds: "well, I didn't know the word at that time, but she said '*analytic* tradition', and that it would be a good place to start for a confused young man."

“Phew,” I think to myself, “so there has been a time when he didn’t know the meaning of *analytic* either.” While trying to conceal my relief, I continue: “And after your bachelor in Oxford, what happened?”

“Then I studied physics for a year because I wanted to become a philosopher of science, maybe of quantum mechanics, although eventually I became an historian of philosophy and science. Thus, I studied physics in order to qualify for the Cambridge program of philosophy of science but then for very bizarre reasons – having to do with a scholarship to England I didn’t get and another one I did get – the Rotary Foundation sent me to Harvard, where I stayed for my master and PhD eventually. I find it funny to think of myself as someone who went to Harvard against his own will. I belonged to a rather anti-American generation and had really wanted to go to Cambridge. Moreover, Harvard didn’t have a philosophy of science program, but a history of science program. I really went there *contre coeur*, but I soon realized that I was much more suited for the history of philosophy and science. On the one hand, my philosophical training and my way of thinking were more in keeping with the demands of that discipline. On the other hand, my mathematical skills weren’t at the right level to fathom the depth that no physicists could have fathomed without me. In one year of physics it is quite impossible to master all the mathematical niceties that you need to understand Schrödinger equations, quantum electrodynamics and general relativity theory.”

*I used to row a lot, I think
it was the only sport in
which I was ever good.*

Being a foreigner in this country myself, I empathize with him and start thinking about what these two and a half years in the Netherlands taught me. Therefore, once again, I turn the question to Lüthy, who ponders over it for a moment and then answers: “If you go to another country at a young age, it has a big impact on you, at any rate. The three years in England were really formative not only because of the environment but also because I was twenty years old, pretty naïve, everything struck me with a particular force. What I found amazing about England was the combination of splendor and squalor. There is the part of England that is poor and dirty and alcoholic and without hope, and then you have the part that is glorious. Most students who were in my year were really impressive, Oxford can handpick in a way that other universities, including ours, cannot. Nonetheless, you could see an unpleasant divide between rich upper-class kids who had gone to private schools and who had, for example, their rhetorical and oratorical skills perfected in a way that I had never seen at such a young age. They were so self-confident, they knew they were going to be the new elite. At the same time, however, there were also kids who were brilliant but came from really poor cities where much of the population was unemployed.” He pauses and then adds: “It will sound as a tautology, but I admired the admirable parts of England and I was

scandalized by the neglect of the others.” And he ends with a positive note about the Netherlands: “Being Swiss and therefore from a fairly egalitarian society, I recognize myself much more in Dutch society where the extremes are far less extreme than in England.”

“Do you miss Oxford?” I react having in my head all the varnished pictures of Oxford.

“I regularly have dreams about Oxford,” Lüthy admits. “As a student, I found it a place of an incredible mystique, and some memories tend to visit me at night. I loved walking through those old courtyards and long medieval roads and buildings and listening to the choirs, especially in winter when it is dark outside and there are these

As a student, I found Oxford a place of an incredible mystique, and some memories tend to visit me at night.

choir boys and student choristers that sing in the candle light. When I go back, the sentiment still gets the better of me. This is maybe also because at Oxford, you’re not a student at the university but at a

college, where you live and spend your time, so you know your entire year quite well. My college, for instance, was Magdalen College, which was one of the more aristocratic ones. I didn’t know that when I applied, and when I found out I had the same love-disgust reaction to it that I mentioned earlier. In the year above me, there was the brother of Lady Diana, who simply had one of the rooms in the college but then during the weekends he would take off in his Bentley. Incidentally, he was the next-door neighbor of a militant left-wing student, who called herself Cat, and walked around College with a rat on her shoulder. Early Spencer and Cat with her rat got along just fine, by the way.”

“What about the States?” I ask thinking that it must have been quite a drastic change from Oxford, especially around the time of the Gulf War when he moved there. “What had the biggest impact on you?”

“I ended up with a feeling that most Europeans end up having, namely an incredible respect for these campuses.” Then continues: “Harvard is so international and so progressive, they have the best minds, the best politicians-in-breeding, it is an island of transnational brilliance, there is optimism and enthusiasm, the widespread idea that if there is a problem, they can solve it. However, I soon realized that while I felt at home on campus, I didn’t feel at home in the country, and as I thought about the future, I knew that I didn’t want to live in the States. I also discovered an obvious thing, but I still had to discover it, namely that we Europeans think in small units, our towns, regions, countries, while America is so vast – five time zones from Alaska to Puerto Rico – that Europeans like myself often fail to wrap their minds around it. We (Europeans) have difficulties in understanding how decisions are taken and why, for example, symbols have the huge importance they have. I regretted leaving Harvard when I did, but I was happy to be back in Europe.”

“And what was your next step?” I add knowing that the journey didn’t end there and curious to find out how he ended up in the Netherlands married to an Italian Professor. As already stated, their love didn’t blossom here, so there must be at least a piece of the puzzle missing.

“Then I had two postdoc years, as all PhD students have to do while hoping for a job somewhere. I spent the first one in Rome at the *Istituto Svizzero*, which was incredibly beautiful; from my bed, I could see the Quirinale, the Palace of the Italian President, and the institute was inhabited by artists and archeologists. The following year I went to Berlin, to the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, and there the view from my window were the shrubs above Hitler’s former *Führerbunker*. At that time, I already knew I would come to Nijmegen and work for three and a half years, in a very big project that Hans Thijssen had won. In the end that became a tenured job.”

Okay, my curiosity has been satisfied. I decide to go back to my list of questions, although at this point it is quite clear to me that I have let myself be driven more by my eagerness than by what I had prepared beforehand. I suddenly remember that prof. Palmerino told me that a few years ago they walked together from Domodossola, in northern Italy, to Switzerland, and that when Lüthy was younger he biked around the Alps. Changing the topic abruptly, I ask what his relationship to nature and mountains is like.

“This relationship to the Alps is part of my socialization.” Lüthy explains. “It is very typical for Swiss families to go for a hike on Sundays, we used to start from where I grew up in Basel and then walk for an hour and a half to the first village in Alsace – which belongs to France – have lunch there and then walk back home. Somehow, hiking is a good way of making the week’s preoccupations evaporate. Like all kids, I hated these walks and I wanted to stay on the couch, but I’ve always felt great when I came back. Now, looking back at it, I can say that this habit has been imprinted on me, so much so that I now try to impose it on the next generation, with somewhat less success. At any rate, there is something enriching about walking and being able to recognize the sound of the birds or to name the different plants.”

Plants. Another magic word. Splijststof loves plants, to the point that we give a small cactus as a thank-you gift to the speakers at our Film&Philosophy events. Gaia, the editor-in-chief, together with me, once told me that she spotted prof. Lüthy in an elevator with a plant and pretty enthusiastic about it. Now I wonder where that plant is, since I don’t see any in his office, and how it is doing.

“Oh yes!” he vivaciously answers. “There was this beautiful initiative when the university turned ninety-five where every professor who wanted to could go and teach in a primary school. We put on our togas, cycled on Radboud bicycles and gave small and friendly lectures. Then as a thank-you gift, we got a *hazel*. I was indeed happy about it, not just because it is a meaningful gift, but also because the plant has quite

some symbolic connotations. It now grows in our garden. We have a small city garden, however, so there is no place for great gardening ambitions,” he adds giving a hint of a smile.

While we are talking, someone knocks at the door, time is almost up. After our interview prof. Lüthy has to meet up with some coordinators of InScience, the International Science Film Festival that takes place in Nijmegen, because he has been invited to discuss the movie *Around the Sun*. However, he doesn't rush and gives me enough time to conclude our talk and ask him one last question. I know exactly what I have to address now: that famous rumor about his unfollowed piece of advice to Matt Damon and about the other piece of advice whose rejection by the addressee didn't have the fortunate consequences we associate with *Good Will Hunting*, *Saving Private Ryan*, the *Ocean's* Trilogy, the *Bourne* series and many others. It's time to ask about this, prepare the popcorn and get comfortable on my chair while listening to the whole story.

“I paid for my PhD in Harvard by being a tutor at Lowell House, an undergraduate house. Undergraduate houses are the place where most students live and spend their time, there have dining halls, common rooms, and all houses organize cultural and recreational activities, but also provide academic facilities. I was responsible for looking after the academic record of 550 students. We had a list of students who had interrupted their studies to do something else, and each year it was my task to call them up and convince them to come back and finish their degree, assuming that

*Boris Johnson was one of the members,
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this was what their money-paying parents wanted too. One of the students was a kid called Matthew P. Damon, who was studying English. Matt Damon left after his second year and

went to Hollywood to attempt to sell a script of his and become an actor. I called him and told him that Hollywood was a tough place, that he wouldn't have been able to sell his script very easily and that it was better to finish his degree first. He started telling me that he had gone to a few parties and had good connections, that there were good hopes and that he and his friend Ben Affleck had several possibilities ahead of them. You know, my job was to persuade him to come back and finish his degree, so I insisted for a while, but unsuccessfully. Then I obviously forgot about the whole conversation, graduated and left the States. Some years later, I went to visit Carla Rita in Rome, where she was finishing her PhD. We decided to go to the cinema and we watched a movie with Matt *Dillon* as the main actor. When we walked out of the theater, I kept on repeating the name of Matt Dillon and telling myself and Carla Rita that there was someone with a very similar surname [*Dillon Damon, tomayto tomahto*] whom I advised not to go into acting but I couldn't remember the right

name. And then, while we were driving back to her home, we saw a big poster of *Good Will Hunting* with Matt Damon's face on it, and I started shouting that he was the one! So well, how good that he didn't follow my advice!"



Matthew Damon
D-42 + E-41 + 42
2925 SR 92/93?

Damon Matthew P.

SR 92/93?

161 D-42+E-41+42

2925+7149+ ENGL

Matt Damon's picture and details in the Lowell House Handbook 1992-1993

I cannot help but agree with him about this last remark. But the story isn't finished. "The other advice that I gave without any official instruction" – prof. Lüthy continues – "was the one to Boris Johnson. In Oxford I had been elected into a political debating club, called the Canning Club. It was composed of twelve members and at some stage I was vice secretary. Boris Johnson was one of the members, and I found he had such pompous and bizarre political views, mixing up prejudice, knowledge, associations, quotes. He was quick-witted and very self-confident, and already aspiring to becoming prime minister. At the time, he had also managed to become president of the Oxford Union, a famous and very prestigious debating society where real politicians are invited to speak. Boris Johnson was exceptionally able at networking and working his way into politics. I remember that after a particularly heated discussion about international politics, I advised him to go into fiction or comedy and never become a politician. In this case, I do regret that he hasn't followed my advice."

He concludes by telling me about John le Carré, the famous writer of espionage novels, who was a teacher at Eton College, the college where Boris Johnson and David Cameron studied. In his latest thriller, le Carré criticizes the way people are educated at Eton, as most of them become powerful, despite an evident lack of competence and life experience.

On this note, our interview ends. We say "Arrivederci, buona giornata" (Goodbye, have a nice day) to each other, and I leave the room. While walking across the corridor to the lift I think about the metaphorical bottle of *Brunello di Montalcino* I have just opened and about how pleasant it tastes.



Filosoof op de arbeidsmarkt

Willem Vernooij & Gaia Klabbers



Bob Kersten

“Na mijn bachelor rechten ging ik kijken naar waar ik nog écht energie van krijg, en dat is om met dingen bezig te zijn die ik helemaal niet snap. Specialiseren doe je uiteindelijk vanzelf wel, maar ik denk dat je tijdens je opleiding zoveel mogelijk moet generaliseren.”

Bob Kersten is in 2017 aan de Tilburg University in Filosofie afgestudeerd. Hij werkt sinds oktober 2017 bij Berenschot, een organisatieadvieskantoor in Utrecht. Berenschot helpt organisaties met slimme oplossingen en vernieuwende inzichten. Bob werkt op het snijvlak van mensen, wetten en overheid, met name de gemeentelijke overheid. Een goede filosoof, zo stelt Bob, staat midden in de maatschappij. Volgens hem kunnen er belangrijke bruggen worden geslagen door verschillende disciplines te combineren en daarbij een filosofische houding te ontwikkelen.

Hoe ben je bij Berenschot terecht gekomen?

Eigenlijk is dit wel een grappig verhaal. Ik heb HBO-rechten gedaan en daarna een master Nederlands recht, maar dat vond ik erg saai. Toen ik vervolgens met mijn master in de filosofie klaar was, ben ik op zoek gegaan naar een baan. Ik heb toen een paar sollicitaties gehad waar niets uit kwam, maar die achteraf ook niet in de juiste richting voor mij waren. Ik besloot een maandje op vakantie te gaan om nieuwe energie op te doen. Daar kwam ik iemand tegen die in het sociaal domein werkt en bezig was om mensen met een afstand tot de arbeidsmarkt aan het werk te krijgen. Zij kwam uit Zuid-Afrika, waar huidskleur een grote rol speelt en zij zat midden in die problematiek. Dat fascineerde me. Berenschot als bedrijf kende ik al en toen ik terugkwam van vakantie zag ik een vacature op het gebied van het sociaal domein. Daar heb ik toen meteen op gereageerd.

Kun je iets vertellen over Berenschot?

Berenschot werkt zowel in de publieke als de private sector, maar onze grootste doelgroep is wel de publieke sector. We doen bijvoorbeeld veel werk in sectoren als de zorg en het openbare bestuur, maar ook ‘energie- en klimaattransitie’ is een belang-

rijk thema. Ik ben zelf adviseur in het sociaal domein. Dat betekent dat ik advies geef aan gemeentes en uitvoeringsorganisaties over de wetten in het sociaal domein, zoals bijvoorbeeld de participatiewet, de WMO, de jeugdwet en de schuldhulpverlening, maar ook bij inburgeringskwesaties. Ik geef advies over visie, strategie, maar ook over bedrijfsvoering. Daarvoor moet ik veel door het hele land reizen.

Je bent afgestudeerd in zowel rechtsgeleerheid als filosofie en solliciteerde bij Berenschot, hoe werd er tegen jouw achtergrond in de filosofie aangekeken?

Er werd heel goed op gereageerd, want er is voor het sociaal domein geen direct gerelateerde studie. Iedereen in mijn sector is dus eigenlijk een vreemde eend in de bijt. Ook reageerde men erg positief op mijn sollicitatie vanwege mijn gecombineerde kennis van rechten en filosofie. Bij de studie rechten leer je om binnen bepaalde kaders problemen op te lossen, uit te werken en uit te leggen, maar bij filosofie leer je juist om buiten die kaders te denken.

Ik heb in Tilburg vakken gevolgd van de master ‘Philosophy, Science and Society’ en de master ‘Ethiek van Bedrijf en Organisatie’. De titel van mijn scriptie is: “Conflicts in Logic and Law: solving disagreements with Deontic Modal Logic”. Nou, daar liep natuurlijk héél Nederland warm voor! Tegenwoordig kom ik dit specifieke onderwerp niet zo vaak meer tegen in mijn dagelijkse werk, maar de dilemma’s en de manier waarop je problemen oplost, komen wél terug in mijn dagelijkse werkzaamheden.

Op welke manier komt dit terug in je werk?

De wijze van problemen oplossen op mijn werk heeft veel overeenkomsten met hoe we doorgaans een filosofisch probleem benaderen. Namelijk, je gaat eerst eens kijken

Kies je stage op een plek die later interessant is voor werkgevers, maar ook voor jou als persoon interessant en leerzaam is.

over welke begrippen we het hebben, de achtergrond van die begrippen, hoe die begrippen zich tot elkaar verhouden en zo steeds verder. Je pakt problemen dus heel systematisch aan. Dit is een methode die voor filosofen heel normaal is. Bij andere opleidingen

komt deze methode echter nauwelijks aan bod. Toch blijkt dat dit binnen ieder ander vakgebied wel echt als een ongelooflijk nuttige vorm van kritisch denken wordt gezien.

Herkennen je collega’s dat ook?

Ja, ik word vooral gevraagd wanneer dingen ingewikkeld worden, bijvoorbeeld wanneer het gaat over meta-stelsels of hoe verschillende aspecten zich tot elkaar verhouden. Het schrijven van essays en het begrijpen van ingewikkelde teksten is een soort denktraining. Je leert hoe je die complexe materie kan vatten. Dat wordt na een

tijd studeren steeds normaler en je gaat het automatisch bij iedere tekst doen. Dat is de filosofische training die je krijgt. Het vatten van iets wat eigenlijk heel complex is, om het vervolgens simpel uit te kunnen leggen.

Hoe belangrijk is het denk je om verschillende disciplines te combineren in voorbereiding op de arbeidsmarkt?

Ik denk dat het belangrijk is voor studenten filosofie om stil te staan bij de vraag in hoeverre ze zich willen richten op alleen filosofie, of op een bredere voorbereiding op de arbeidsmarkt. Dat zie je natuurlijk ook terug in of iemand ervoor kiest om stage te gaan lopen. Mijn advies is: kies je stage op een plek die later interessant is voor werkgevers, maar ook voor jou als persoon interessant en leerzaam is. Kies een stage die iets toevoegt aan je palet van kennis, ervaring en competenties. Wanneer je je aandacht alleen richt op dingen die direct met filosofie te maken hebben, dan denk ik dat iemand die bij een ander soort bedrijf stage heeft gelopen of met zijn bijbaantje bijvoorbeeld buiten de gebaande paden is getreden, interessanter is voor een werkgever. Daarnaast gaat het natuurlijk ook gewoon over de vraag wie jij bent en de bewustwording dat de keuzes die je maakt je ook maken tot wie je bent als persoon.

Wat zijn andere vaardigheden, die van meerwaarde zijn in je werk, die je hebt opgestoken tijdens je studie?

Ik werk in een heel maatschappelijke context en daarbij zijn vakken over de politieke en sociale filosofie heel bruikbaar. Vaak zie je dat mensen gesprekken hebben over belangrijke waarden, begrippen en deugden, zonder dat ze dit zelf in de gaten hebben. Wat dan van grote toegevoegde waarde is, is dat je deze waarden kunt benoemen. Bijvoorbeeld in een discussie over bezuinigingen kan ik duidelijk maken dat het niet gaat om de cijfers, maar om de wijze waarop een bestuur zich wil verhouden tot de burger. Willen wij dat de burger alles krijgt wat hij of zij wil, willen wij een overheid zijn die vooral rendabel is voor zijn burgers, of willen wij een overheid zijn die vertrouwt op de zelfredzaamheid van de burgers? Ik vind de theorie van John Rawls heel behulpzaam om zulke zaken te verhelderen. Het maakt de discussie heel concreet en dit helpt om uiteindelijk een beslissing te kunnen maken.

Ik denk dat filosofen snel de neiging hebben om te zeggen dat iets ingewikkeld moet zijn, want anders raakt het de essentie niet. Ik denk dat dit alleen klopt binnen een academische discussie en dat het daarbuiten niet meer op gaat.

Wat is de taak van de filosoof in de maatschappij?

Ik vind het zelf belangrijk om een rol midden in de maatschappij te hebben. De taak en meerwaarde van de filosoof is denk ik het mee kunnen nemen van een ander in verschillende denkrichtingen. Het is leuk om zelf dingen te weten of te begrijpen, maar het is nog veel leuker om met die dingen iets te kunnen doen. Anders is het net alsof je een opleiding tot verpleegkundige doet om vervolgens geen mensen te

gaan verzorgen. Promoveren is niet voor iedereen interessant of weggelegd, dus bekijk vooral ook hoe breed en fascinerend het werkveld buiten de universiteiten is. Weet ook dat heel veel organisaties, zowel publiek als privaat, juist zitten te wachten op mensen die vernieuwend en kritisch denken. Filosofie is daar een uitstekende basis voor. Wees vooral ook niet te verlegen om dit kenbaar te maken op de arbeidsmarkt. Wellicht kom je uit bij bedrijven waar je niet van had verwacht er ooit te gaan werken, zoals een organisatieadvieskantoor. En dat is niet erg. Ik vergeet bij Berenschot nooit waarom ik filosofie ben gaan studeren: om Nederland een stukje beter te maken.

SPLIJT|STOF

ZOEKT | REDACTEURS

Splijststof vergrijst en zoekt frisse filosofen. Ben jij jong van geest en zit je nog niet vastgeroest in je eigen dogma's? Meld je dan aan voor de redactie van splijststof door een mailtje te sturen naar redactie@splijststof.com.



De kroon op het monnikenwerk zetten

Spijststof

Ted van Aanholt

Maandagmorgen, kwart voor negen, dat is toch geen uur om jong filosofische harten snel te doen kloppen. Te moeten leren hoe in de vroege *universitates* keer op keer in minuscule nuances de woorden van ‘De Filosoof’ worden bijgepunt. Hoe de antieke wijsheden als moderne vluchtelingen hun weg naar het Westen vonden om daar misschien wel de eerste slachtoffers te worden van een witwasschandaal.

Liggend in bed trekt de maandagochtend voorbij met een buik vol weekend en een hoofd vol godsweerleggingen, terwijl in de straat van de *Doctor Communis* zich een wereld ontsluit die nog slechts door de kok en de bakker gekend worden. Waar de filosoof nog geen pretstudent was, maar zich een weg zocht tussen Kerk en Kennis. De weg die niet meer leidde naar Rome, maar naar vrouwe Sophia en zelfs met tweehonderdnegentien verboden niet langer kon worden versperd. Met inkt en perkament werd daar, per commentaar, het fundament voor de informatiemaatschappij verder gegoten.

Maar wie kon toen weten dat zes eeuwen na dato algoritmisch aangegeven afbeeldingen meer spreken dan duizenden woorden, die orthografisch afgekort en bestoft de bibliotheken belasten terwijl *quaestio* na *quaestio* verdwijnt in het doolhof van de tijd. Wachtend op een liefdesbaby van Indiana Jones en Robert Langdon, die al paleograferend een kroon op het monnikenwerk zet.

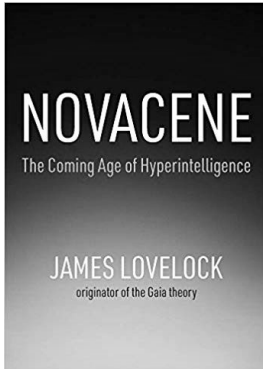
De uren vliegen aan hem voorbij, terwijl zijn gedachten afdwalen naar mediëvale *scriptoria* en steeds weer de vraag zich aandoet of het Latijn van zijn lotgenoot net zo beroerd was als het zijne.

En of daar nu weer een *i*, een *u*, een *m* of *n* moet staan.

**De dwangmatige drukknopdreuner,
de bordbeuker, de toetsenplankpiraat.**

door Mark van Doorn

Verwoed jakker je naar het einde
Tak, tak, tak!
Met de snelheid van het licht landen
jouw twee wijsvingers op het alfabet
Lichaam en geest in volmaakte harmonie
In jouw ooghoeken zie je een paar hoofden
nieuwsgierig jouw kant opdraaien
Daar heb jij echter maling aan
dit is jouw moment
Dit wordt jouw klapper
Tak, tak, tak!
Onbekommerd, vol overgave en
zonder enige souplesse
tem jij die ondermaatse tikbak
Gestaafd door de meubels die bemoedigend
mee trillen in jouw krachtinspanning
trommel jij je er op los
Opperste concentratie en opperste onbeholpenheid
Nog een letter
Nog een letter
Nog een letter
Tak, tak, tak!
Jaloers ben ik,
Op jouw hamerhanden zonder gêne
Getergd ben ik,
Jij toetsenplankpiraat



James Lovelock (with Bryan Appleyard) -
Novacene. The Coming Age of Hyperintelligence

Allen Lane

ISBN 9780241399361

139 pages. €19,95

Two decades after its first public appearance, it seems near impossible to write a book on the anthropocene that doesn't instantly disappear in the ever-expanding sea of publications on the topic. Yet, James Lovelock's *Novacene. The Coming Age of Hyperintelligence* stays afloat. At the age of 100, the inventor of the Gaia hypothesis – the theory that holds that the Earth is a self-regulating system – comes up with a thought-provoking new theory about the future of life on our planet. According to Lovelock, we are currently witnessing the end of the Anthropocene, and already standing with one foot in the Novacene: the age of hyperintelligence, in which humans are no longer the prime understanders of the cosmos.

From the start of the book (finished with the help of Bryan Appleyard) Lovelock is clear about his convictions: we are alone. There is no such thing as extraterrestrial life. The cosmos is simply not old enough to produce intelligent life more than once. "Our existence is a freakish one-off." Human intellectual capacities have evolved in extraordinary ways and made us the sole bearers of knowledge. But being the only species capable of understanding the cosmos has burdened us with an enormous responsibility, for the end of humanity would mean the end of the knowing cosmos. Luckily, new forms of artificial intelligence are coming to the rescue. In his signature autobiographical writing style Lovelock enlightens us with an audacious vision of the not-so-distant future, in which a new kind of cyborgs intelligence will evolve and take over our role as the most intelligent terrestrial beings.

But fear not! Lovelock's cyborgs are not immediately endangering our human existence. We gave birth to them and they depend upon organic life like we depend upon photosynthesizing organisms. Building upon one of his most important findings, the fact that organic life regulates the life conditions on Earth, Lovelock argues that the greatest threat to intelligent life (both human and cyborg) is overheating. For ages the sun allowed life to flourish and evolve, but now the sun has become too hot for organic life to develop any further. Newly evolving electronic life forms are, due to

their hyperintelligence, more fit for the task of keeping planet Earth inhabitable. But they cannot do without organic life. Since the systemic regulation of the terrestrial climate is controlled by the biota, which is a kind of organic life, the extinction of those biota would mean an uncontrollable and exponential rise in global temperature. Such an extinction would render the environment uninhabitable for electronic life too, for no cyborg will survive terrestrial temperatures above 50°C.

Before delving deeper into the speculative fabulation of the Novacene, Lovelock retells the story of the era we are about to leave; the Anthropocene. In Lovelock's narrative the Anthropocene starts with Thomas Newcomen's 'atmospheric steam engine'. From Newcomen's invention in 1712 onwards, the Anthropocene, "the age in which humans acquired the power to change the physical world on a massive scale", evolved driven by market forces. Lovelock follows Lewis Mumford in that it is not the machine, but the economy that made the world of today. That is, although Newcomen's machine had the potential to cause large scale alterations to the physical environment, it was the economic exploitation of that machine that eventually altered the world beyond recognition. The development of such technologies caused a move beyond natural selection; in the Anthropocene, selection became intelligent and intentional (and way faster).

It is rather refreshing to read a book about the anthropocene in which the 'age of humans' is positively received, instead of despised. Unlike most authors writing on this subject, Lovelock thinks that the anthropocene should not be framed as a crime against nature, but rather a consequence of life on Earth, a mere product of evolution, hence an expression of nature. We should embrace the anthropocene, for it stands for the unprecedented expansion of our knowledge of the world and the cosmos. In other words, without the anthropocene we would not be capable of understanding the Earth and its place in the natural environment of the solar system.

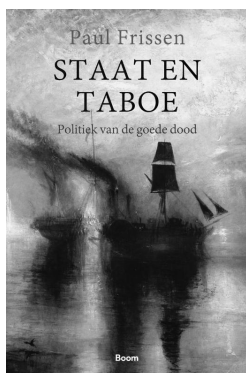
According to Lovelock we will enter the Novacene like we entered the Anthropocene; we will evolve into it. Lovelock shows that there are already examples of hyperintelligence among us. Humans cannot beat nor compete with these forms of artificial intelligence. It is only a matter of time before new machines and forms of intelligence are created by existing artificial intelligence systems; new beings to which our human engineering capacities fall short. The evolution and thinking of these cyborgs will happen at a speed beyond human imaginability. Due to this quick evolution, artificially intelligent life might be a significant part of our world by the end of the century, Lovelock speculates.

Although the Novacene will initially be an era in which humans and cyborgs live in peace – after all, both have a common interest in securing their survival – Lovelock also warns us for the potential dangers of artificial intelligence. Once the cyborgs have saved the physical environment by stabilizing the planetary climate, we don't

know what will happen next. As we could not foresee the consequences of Newcomen's steam engine, we cannot foresee what will happen once we become a part of the world of cyborgs.

In this dense little book Lovelock proves himself master of a wide array of disciplines; from biochemistry to philosophy, from politics to biology, and from artificial intelligence to speculative fabulation. A provocative and essential read from one of the world's most important environmental thinkers. *Novacene* will spark the imagination of humans and cyborgs alike.

A Dutch translation of Novacene will appear in February 2020.



Boekrecensie
Staat en taboe
Jochem Snijders

Paul Frissen - *Staat en taboe: Politiek van de goede dood*

Boom

ISBN 9789024424207

200 pagina's. €29,90

“Ik wil gewoon huppakee, weg.” Wie het euthanasiedebat in Nederland de afgelopen jaren heeft gevolgd zal zich deze uitspraak van Hannie Goudriaan misschien nog kunnen herinneren. Goudriaan was één van de drie mensen die gevolgd werden in de documentaire *Levenseindekliniek* (2016) van Marcel Ouddeken en Hans Kema. Goudriaan wordt in deze documentaire anderhalf jaar lang gevolgd op haar pad naar een zelfgekozen levenseinde. Ze had semantische dementie, waardoor ze steeds minder woorden tot haar beschikking had om zichzelf uit te drukken. “Ik wil graag klaar,” is een andere zin die ze gebruikt om haar doodswens te verwoorden.

Anderhalf jaar verder, toen de dementie al ver gevorderd was, was het moment van euthanasie daar. Van de vrouw die stellig haar eigen dood agendeerde leek op dat moment weinig over. In de ogen van veel kijkers waren het haar echtgenoot, naaste familie en de arts die haar er op dat moment van probeerde te overtuigen dat het spuitje toch écht beter voor haar was. “Het is verschrikkelijk,” fluisterde ze terwijl de arts haar de injectie toediende. “Verschrikkelijk.” “Even dapper wezen,” antwoordde haar echtgenoot, zijn arm om haar heengeslagen. “Je bent al zo’n tijd dapper.”

De uitzending van *Levenseindekliniek* deed veel stof opwaaien. Niet alleen de beslissing om het stervensmoment zelf in beeld te brengen bleek controversieel, ook de omstandigheden waaronder de euthanasie werd toegediend leverde geschokte reacties op: “Moord met anderhalf miljoen getuigen,” tweette hoogleraar cognitieve neurowetenschap Victor Lamme bijvoorbeeld. “Levensgevaarlijk”, vond SGP-leider Kees van der Staaij. Volgens anderen deed de manier waarop de documentaire was gemonteerd geen recht aan de daadwerkelijke omstandigheden. Zo publiceerde de Volkskrant een achtergrondartikel waarin het verhaal achter de beelden wordt genuanceerd.¹

¹ <https://www.volkskrant.nl/wetenschap/het-verhaal-achter-huppakee-weg-en-de-dood-van-hannie~b7eeea1dd/>, geraadpleegd op 19-11-2019.

Hoe we de beelden in de documentaire ook moeten opvatten, ze roepen in ieder geval een aantal prangende vragen op. Is het ethisch geoorloofd iemands verzoek op levensbeëindiging in te willigen wanneer die zijn of haar doodswens niet langer kan uitdrukken? En hoe zit dat bij patiënten met een psychische aandoening of een “stapel van ouderdomsklachten”, zoals de andere twee deelnemers aan de documentaire? In hoeverre moet de huidige regelgeving rondom euthanasie verruimd worden?

Wat opvalt is dat de argumenten voor of tegen het verruimen van de euthanasiewet doorgaans op dezelfde leest zijn geschoeid, namelijk de ethische. De voornaamste inzet lijkt de keuzevrijheid van het individu te zijn: iets waar de politiek zich niet mee moet bemoeien. Het debat lijkt zich vooral te richten op kwesties waarbij die keuzevrijheid in het geding komt. In *Staat en taboe* stelt Paul Frissen dat hierdoor een fundamentele vraag vergeten dreigt te worden: mag de staat het recht om te doden, besloten in het geweldsmonopolie, delen? Of, zoals Frissen het anders formuleert: “Mag de staat [...] burgers – in dit geval dokters – toestaan andere burgers te doden?”

Frissen tracht deze vraag politiek-filosofisch te beantwoorden, “niet ethisch, moreel of religieus”, en doet dit op uiterst nauwkeurige wijze. Elk hoofdstuk in het boek belicht een bepaald aspect van de problematiek rondom de ‘politiek van de goede dood’. In het eerste hoofdstuk belicht Frissen de huidige Nederlandse praktijk van ‘levensbeëindigend handelen’, en geeft hij een schets van het beleid, de wetgeving en het huidige debat rondom euthanasie. In de drie daarop volgende hoofdstukken schetst hij drie fenomenen die dienen als theoretisch kader om zijn vraag te beantwoorden: de grens, het verbod en het taboe.

In zijn onderzoek naar het fenomeen van de grens gaat Frissen vooral in op de vraag of de staat grenzen moet stellen aan de autonomie en zelfbeschikking van de burger, en zo ja, welke. De zelfbeschikking van het individu bestaat volgens Frissen alleen binnen de context van de gemeenschap, en kan alleen worden geëgitimeerd met een politieke beslissing. Het stellen van grenzen “in velerlei zin” is volgens Frissen de normatieve kerntaak van het politieke:

“Levensbeëindiging door geweld – ook op verzoek – gaat over ultieme begrenzing.” De dood is immers ook het definitieve vertrek uit de gemeenschap.

Dit brengt hem bij het fenomeen van het verbod. Allereerst het verbod op doden: “Omdat de staat het geweldsmonopolie bezit, is het doden van burgers door burgers verboden.” De staat heeft geweld nodig om staatsmacht uit te kunnen oefenen, en staatsmacht is nodig om het recht te handhaven. Geweld gaat als eerste grond vooraf aan het recht, maar is ook een laatste grond: de staat houdt op staat te zijn als deze niet meer over het geweldsmonopolie beschikt. Naast het verbod op doden behandelt Frissen de verboden die voortkomen uit de biopolitiek: de staat is zich steeds intensiever gaan bemoeien met leven en dood, en ontwikkelingen rondom levensverlenging, levensverbetering en levensbeëindiging roepen nieuwe vragen op rondom

*De dood is immers ook
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begrenzing en verbod. Frissen besteedt hier speciale aandacht aan de positie van de medicus: “Hij mag gelegitimeerd ingrijpen in het leven, en uiteindelijk mag hij doden. Wordt daarmee het ultieme verbod opgeheven voor de dokter? Deelt de staat met hem zijn geweldsmonopolie? Of wordt de dokter voor deze taak de dienaar van de staat?”

Hier belandt Frissen bij het derde fenomeen, dat van het taboe: “De staat heeft grenzen en verboden nodig, en deze worden gemarkeerd door taboes.” Deze taboes zijn essentieel voor het in stand houden van de orde. Nederland, zo stelt Frissen, ziet zich als “taboedoorbrekende natie *par excellence*”. Het doorbreken van een taboe is echter ook altijd een aantasting van de machtsverhoudingen. Bovendien, zo vraagt Frissen: “Het doden van een mens kan toch onmogelijk zonder taboes worden begrepen?”

In het vijfde hoofdstuk brengt Frissen deze drie fenomenen ten slotte bij elkaar om te concluderen dat de staat er goed aan doet de bestaande wetgeving aan te scherpen in plaats van haar nog verder te verruimen: “De zelfbeschikking die zelfdoding is, moet scherp worden onderscheiden van het doden door de staat dat de vrijheid moet dienen. De goede dood die van staatswege mogelijk wordt gemaakt moet onderwerp van taboes blijven.” Voor Frissen is de dreiging van een hellend vlak reëel: naarmate meer mensen toegang krijgen tot het recht op levensbeëindiging zullen ook meer en meer burgers – in dit geval artsen – deel krijgen aan het geweldsmonopolie. Hierbij is het onduidelijk in hoeverre deze artsen *de staat* dienen, of *de burger* die meent recht te hebben op zelfbeschikking.

In deze theoretische uiteenzetting passeren begrippen als ‘Faustisch verlangen’, ‘het taboe van de niet-dood’ en ‘sacrale secularisering’ de revue, en wordt er ruimte gemaakt voor filosofische kwinkslagen als het onderscheid tussen ‘grenzeloos’ en

Het doorbreken van een taboe is echter ook altijd een aantasting van de machtsverhoudingen.

‘grenzenloos’. Frissens uiteenzetting van zijn theoretische concepten is bijzonder fijnmazig. Tegelijkertijd verliest hij zichzelf soms te veel in wat voor een minder ingewijde lezer aanvoelt als detailwerk. Hierdoor zijn bepaalde passages op zichzelf interessant, maar verdwijnt de argumentatieve rode draad uit het oog. Met name het hoofdstuk over

grenzen lijdt hieraan. Frissen neemt uitgebreid de ruimte om het fenomeen van de grens en haar verschillende aspecten te bespreken: het onderscheid tussen binnen en buiten dat de grens inhoudt; de invloed van de grens op zelfbeschikking; het symbool van de grens; territoriale grenzen; conceptuele grenzen; grenzen die door het politieke worden gesteld; de grens tussen leven en dood; grenzen en identiteit; de scheppende kracht van de grens; grenzen stellen *aan grenzen stellen* – Frissen besteedt veel aandacht aan het leggen van een stevig theoretisch fundament voor zijn ideeën. Deze drang naar volledigheid veroorzaakt bij de lezer soms een gevoel van semantische verzadiging.

In een onderdeel van het eerste hoofdstuk speelt het tegenovergestelde probleem: in ‘*Voltooid leven*’ en *euthanasie – een kleine antropologie* wordt een breed scala aan

figuren die op een bepaalde manier met het euthanasiedebat te maken hebben aan het woord gelaten. Het doel van Frissen is hier om een overzicht te geven van de meningen die zoal verkondigd worden door mensen die direct met het onderwerp te maken hebben. Deze meningen worden met weinig commentaar of kritische toetsing weergegeven, ondanks dat sommige uitspraken nogal bizar zijn. Zo stelt een tegenstander van de strafbaarstelling van euthanasie: “Uiteindelijk is het curieus dat Napoleon heeft bepaald dat het strafbaar is, een man die er allang niet meer is. Als ik, naar mijn levensovertuiging, principieel meen iets te mogen, dan is het onaanvaardbaar dat ik dan het stempel ‘crimineel’ krijg van de wet.” Een uitspraak die een politieagent ook had kunnen optekenen uit de mond van een katsbezopen lid van een literair dispuut. Het is prijzenswaardig dat Frissen de tijd heeft genomen te praten met mensen uit het vakgebied waar hij als filosoof over schrijft – naar mijn mening een vereiste voor iedere intellectueel die zich mengt in het publieke debat. Toch is het zonde dat Frissen hun woorden slechts verbatim presenteert en er in latere hoofdstukken ook niet echt meer op terugkomt. Dit zorgt ervoor dat zijn verdere theoretische verhandeling soms toch niet volledig in dialoog met het vakgebied voelt.

Hoewel *Staat en taboe* soms hoge eisen stelt aan het geduld van de lezer, biedt het een interessante – en inderdaad ogenschijnlijk vaak vergeten – invalshoek op het euthanasiedebat. Een invalshoek die wellicht nieuw leven kan blazen in een vastgelopen discussie. Daarnaast zijn de individuele uiteenzettingen over de grens, het verbod, en met name het taboe ook op zichzelf interessant om te lezen. Ondanks dat *Staat en taboe* op het moment van lezen af en toe wat stoffig aandoet, biedt het achteraf vooral stof tot nadenken.

Het begin van de melancholie

Cas Buijs

**Ben Schomakers - *Het begin van de melancholie***

Klement

ISBN 9789086872367

208 pagina's. €19,99

Verdriet is in. Denkers zoals Dirk de Wachter, Slavoj Žižek, Bert van den Bergh en een leger aan zelfhulp goeroes roepen ons op om het verdriet te omarmen in plaats van het weg te stoppen, zoals onze hedendaagse neoliberale cultuur van ons verlangt. We lijken dus iets met ons verdriet te willen. De eis om altijd maar positief en winnaars te zijn komt ons de neus uit. Het moet dus anders, maar de tweede stap lijkt moeilijk gezet. Hoe kan men verdriet omarmen? Op welke manier kan men er vrede mee hebben? Of zadelen deze auteurs ons op met een onmogelijke opgave?

Het Begin van de Melancholie suggereert op de achterflap een soortgelijk verhaal te vertellen. Dat verdriet niet afgewend moet worden, maar dat het juist iets fundamenteels over onszelf kan zeggen. Het was mijn vrees dat ook dit boek nuances zou ontberen.

Schomakers combineert antieke wijsheid, psychoanalyse en empirische wetenschap om een nauwgezette fenomenologie van het verdriet en de melancholie uiteen te zetten. Het verdriet is een beweging in antwoord op verlies. Wat verloren gaat is wat Schomakers een 'zijnsvorm' noemt, een manier van je tot de werkelijkheid verhouden (kooswoordjes met een bepaalde betekenis of gebruiken die je met een persoon of object deelde, zijn voorbeelden die hij geeft). Verdriet is een soort desoriëntatie van de werkelijkheid, die mogelijk herstelt wanneer men een nieuw 'object' van verlangen vindt. Nieuw, niet alleen als in een vervanging van het oude, maar ook een werkelijk ander object, waardoor een nieuwe vorm van liefde ontstaat.

Melancholie sluit aan op deze analyse, maar is een bitterzoet gevoel. Bitter, omdat het gaat om een herinnering aan het oude object dat ontoegankelijk is geworden. Zoet, omdat de desoriëntatie van verdriet hier niet aanwezig is, aangezien Schomakers' melancholie zich alleen voordoet als er een nieuw object gevonden is. Er is een nieuw leven om te leven, maar het oude is niet helemaal verloren, want het kan blijven bestaan in een ontroerende herinnering.

Het zijn twee treffende analyses, maar het werk is meer dan een mooie beschrijving. Het draagt ook twee belangrijke ethische en filosofische consequenties met zich mee. Allereerst heeft Schomakers' uiteenzetting invloed op wat de rol van de ander

is in het verdriet. Troost is onmogelijk. Schomakers is wantrouwig ten aanzien van verdriet als gedeelde factor. Zo besteedt hij één van de vijf delen van het boek aan de verscheidenheid van manieren waarop verdriet kan worden geroofd. Schomakers refereert hier naar de praktijk waarbij men publiekelijk met het verdriet van een ander te koop gaat lopen. De negatieve connotatie bij het concept 'roven' maakt duidelijk dat Schomakers hier afkeurend tegenover staat, maar toch verdient de verdriet-dief zelf ook een zekere sympathie, omdat het motief achter deze roof vaak een schreeuw om aandacht is. De rover vraagt aandacht voor verdriet die hij of zij zelf niet goed onder woorden kan brengen.

Vaak is dit 'vage verdriet' een geërfd verdriet, het onderwerp van het derde deel van het werk. Aanvankelijk leest dit deel als een nogal misplaatste marginale zijroute. Toch blijkt dit deel uiteindelijk essentieel om complexiteiten rondom verdriet te verklaren, die lastig te begrijpen zijn vanuit het simpele schema dat Schomakers eerder schetst. In dit deel zet Schomakers zijn pessimisme ten aanzien van de rol van de ander in verdriet voort. Niet alleen kunnen we verdriet van een ander erven zonder zelf ooit iets verloren te hebben, maar ook wordt verdriet van een groep mensen (de rouwende natie of de gemarginaliseerde groep) getekend als een stagnerende kracht. Het moge duidelijk zijn dat ik veel moeite heb met een standpunt dat zegt: 'Ik snap dat je mensen wil troosten, maar dit gaat nu eenmaal niet. Je mag best even anderen onder je hoede nemen, maar als dat niet lukt is er niets aan te doen.' Gelukkig lijkt ook Schomakers mijn twijfels te delen. De schommelingen tussen, enerzijds: verdriet als intrinsiek verbonden met eenzaamheid en dus afgesloten voor de ander, en anderzijds: het idee dat steun en hulp essentieel zijn, maken het werk juist zo interessant om te lezen. Zo stelt Schomakers dat geërfd verdriet niet alleen een vloek hoeft te zijn die het leven bezwaard. Het kan ook juist een mogelijkheid zijn om te bewaren wat mooi is in het leven. Immers, verdriet is het verlies van iets moois en deel van de beschreven beweging is de realisatie van de betekenis van dat moois. Ten aanzien van de verdriet-rovers levert Schomakers ook een suggestie voor een strategie die meer recht doet aan de ander, maar helaas blijft deze ietwat steken in vaag taalgebruik als 'eindeloze openheid' en 'nooit vereeltende zachtheid'.

Ten tweede insinueert Schomakers via zijn fenomenologie dat het leven zin heeft. Is dat niet even een meevaller? Dit thema wordt al in eerste paragrafen genoemd, wanneer Schomakers de verdriet-formule van Freud uit *Trauer und Melancholie* verfijnt tot één die niet alleen object voor object vervangt, maar waar elke nieuwe hechting ook een compleet nieuwe en geldige betekenis heeft. Verdriet is het bewijs van deze geldigheid, die ons toont dat het er écht toe deed. Schomakers heeft niets met filosofisch nihilisme of met pogingen om verdriet op te hemelen. In feite staat Schomakers dus lijnrecht tegenover de trend waar ik hem aanvankelijk mee associeerde. Voor Schomakers is het probleem van onze maatschappij niet dat we het verdriet niet omarmen en op een altaar plaatsen, maar dat we in het tijdperk van Creon leven. Creon, de despoot uit de tragedie *Antigone*, wordt gedreven door een

destructieve drang tot erkenning van diens eigen macht. Een dergelijk archetype kan de trage, onvermijdelijke bewegingen van het verdriet en de melancholie niet accepteren. Creon zal het verdriet ontkennen, terwijl Schomakers meer lijkt te betogen voor een erkenning van de bewegingen van het verdriet. Dit is een erkenning die een onvrijheid moet slikken, maar daar tegenover een andere, bijna spinozistische, vrijheid verwerfd.

Mijn tocht door *Het Begin van de Melancholie* was moeizaam, fascinerend en frustrerend tegelijkertijd. Ik dank dit gegeven aan de stijl die Schomakers zich heeft aangemeten. Hij noemt slechts een handvol intellectuele sparringpartners bij naam door het gehele boek heen, maar de literatuurlijst achterin geeft een vijftiental pagina's aan invloeden waarvan sommigen nooit in het boek worden genoemd. Schomakers plaatst zichzelf in een discussie, maar gebruikt het niet als medium voor zijn boodschap. In plaats daarvan zet hij zijn ideeën in zijn eigen taalgebruik, met uitspraken als 'zijnsvormen' en 'verdriet-rovers', uiteen. Daarbij is hij niet zo gul met voorbeelden. Zijn paginalange beschrijvingen van de omwentelingen in de ziel gaan zelden met een voorbeeld gepaard.

*Mijn tocht door Het Begin
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Het voordeel van deze stijl is echter dat het zeer associatief werkt voor de lezer zelf. Van de lezer wordt gevraagd om de meer abstracte beschrijvingen aan diens eigen binnenwereld te toetsen. Het werkt. Dit is zo'n boek waarbij je midden in een zin soms stopt om het op je schoot te leggen, gevolgd door een stortvloed van realisaties en herinneringen die je leven een nieuwe context geven. Had Schomakers meer voorbeelden en citaten gegeven, dan had zijn beschrijving louter gepast in de rigide vorm van het voorbeeld: 'Jouw associatie telt niet, want deze past niet in de mal van het voorbeeld'. Nadelig is echter dat de lezer nogal hulpeloos staat wanneer de snaar niet geraakt wordt. Sommige passages waren mij compleet vreemd. Zonder expliciete intellectuele sparringpartners blijven de posities waartegen Schomakers zich afzet uiterst vaag. Een discussie voorbij de parameters die Schomakers zelf uitzet komt hierdoor maar moeilijk van de grond. De stijl van Schomakers geeft het boek een vrijheid in associatie en taalgebruik, maar tegelijkertijd zijn verwijzingen en citaten nodig om een rijkere discussie op gang te brengen.

Het werk is mooi, maar gelimiteerd. Ik zou graag een meer academisch en uitgebreider complementair werk lezen. Zoals Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self* schreef naast *A Secular Age*, zou Schomakers wellicht een werk kunnen bieden dat uitgebreider en preciezer is. Misschien niet zo associatief, vrij en bondig als het boek dat hij ons nu geeft, maar wél een werk dat zich actiever in het debat mengt, zodat de kritiek die Schomaker geeft beter uit de verf komt. Een dergelijk werk zou de open marges, die nu enkel kunnen worden ingekleurd met associaties bij gratie van de welwillende lezer, sterker kunnen formuleren.