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The poverty of (critical) theory

First submission: 20 November 2017

Acceptance: 30 Augustus 2018

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa50i3.3>

ISSN: 0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica • 2018 50(3):
49-87

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The triumph of neoliberalism globally signifies what one might term the poverty of (critical) theory, as does the phenomenon known as ‘post-theory’, with its cynical rejection of the claims of theory. Here I do not wish to retrace the steps of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to remind ourselves of the fatal dialectical intertwinement of enlightenment with obfuscation and domination; rather, I wish to follow the trail suggested by critical motifs in the work of various thinkers to demonstrate the ‘poverty of (critical) theory’, that is, its incapacity to effect the crucial transition from theoretical insight in, and exposition of, the sources of alienation, oppression and ideological obfuscation, to emancipatory action. The work of Gil Germain on technology and consumerism highlights the extent to which contemporary humans’ world has been constructed as one ‘minus desire’, where all needs have supposedly been satisfied, and which tends to produce self-satisfied beings, incapable of ‘acting’ in accordance with the demands of freedom. With Kant’s famous motto, ‘Sapere aude’, as a point of departure, Hardt and Negri’s corrective in terms of the need to act, and not only ‘think’ critically, is pursued. This is followed by an elaboration on Arendt’s *vita activa*, to unpack what *action* amounts to, and whether the conditions for its enactment exist today. What becomes clear is that critical theory is incapable, by itself, of guaranteeing emancipatory action. By way of analogy, first the importance of (critical) ‘thinking’ according to

Stiegler, and then that of distinguishing between theory and what Parker describes as potentially effecting a ‘revolution in subjectivity’ at the psychoanalytical clinic is emphasised; that is, the subject’s re-articulation of her or his relationship with power. The point is that this amounts to a ‘preparation’ for *possible* commensurate transformative action in social reality, and similarly, it is argued, ‘thinking’ as well as critical theory can merely prepare the subject for emancipatory action, which is something irreducibly different from theory. To illustrate the difference between critical theory and emancipatory action, a glimpse is afforded of instances of such action reported in the work of Foster and Klein, before demonstrating (with reference to Nietzsche) what is at stake to move from the level of the individual to that of the collective.

Socialised mankind is that state of society where only one interest rules, and the subject of this interest is either classes or man-kind, but neither man nor men. The point is that now even the last trace of action in what men were doing, the motive implied in self-interest, disappeared (Arendt 1998: 321).

Action was soon and still is almost exclusively understood in terms of making and fabricating, only that making, because of its worldliness and inherent indifference to life, was now regarded as but another form of laboring, a more complicated but not a more mysterious function of the life process (Arendt 1998: 322).

Thought...is still possible, and no doubt actual, wherever men live under the conditions of political freedom. Unfortunately, and contrary to what is currently assumed about the proverbial ivory-tower independence of thinkers, no other human capacity is so vulnerable, and it is in fact far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think (Arendt 1998: 324).

*Wait to see, your true emancipation is a fantasy...
(Muse rock band)*

1. Introduction

The ‘dark’, or pessimistic writers (in Habermas’s view) of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, were not wrong, as Habermas believed, about the dim emancipatory prospects of industrialised society, which they famously sketched in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of 1944/47 (2002). Their diagnosis of the culture industry as “mass deception”, masquerading as “enlightenment”, is

sufficiently well-known (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 94–136) not to reconstruct here. Suffice it to say that for them, the ‘culture industry’ was simply a metonymy of the process, endemic to capitalist society, to transmogrify or ‘manufacture’ basic human needs by way of various agencies (paradigmatically, advertising), to the point where people desired the (mostly superfluous) commodities dished up for them, in the belief that this was a prerequisite for living ‘the good life’. More fundamentally, though, the corollary of this ‘one-dimensional’ (Marcuse) existence was the valorisation of calculative, instrumental rationality, which (increasingly since the 18th Century) has been prioritised as the paradigm of knowledge, even if, strictly speaking, it only applied to the natural sciences and technology – which did not prevent the social sciences from imitating them in this respect.

From here it was but a small step to the widespread belief that society was ‘rationally’ structured and hence an environment fit for human happiness and freedom. One can add, on the one hand, that the reigning orthodoxy has it that there is ‘no alternative’ (Thatcher, Cameron) to this social and economic totality, that is, that it is in principle unalterable and self-sufficient, and on the other, that the Critical Theory of Horkheimer and Adorno was predicated, at least initially, on the contrary insight, that it is pervasively irrational and, in fact, susceptible to historical change, which could bring humans closer to liberty and happiness. Despite Jürgen Habermas’s (1987: 332–333) criticism of his older Frankfurt School colleagues, he agrees with them on the last point, albeit for reasons that emphasise the supposedly historically neglected communicative potential of reason, to bring about intersubjective agreement or consensus. My concern in this paper is not to pursue the differences between Habermas and his predecessors on these issues, except to point out that, judging by present evidence globally, Horkheimer and Adorno were right, and Habermas arguably wrong: never before has the world witnessed as much collective and individual irrationality, combined with calculative, instrumental (including ‘strategic’) rationality, manifesting itself in diverse ways, to be discussed below. In a nutshell: if Habermas (1987: 73–77) believed, as implied in his theory of ‘communicative action’ – which is always ‘action’ communicatively oriented towards agreement according to “criticizable validity claims” (1987: 184), and hence, as will be seen below, not ‘action’ in the sense that I pursue in this paper – that it could save the day in the face of rampant ‘strategic action’ (the disingenuous wielding of instrumental power over others for the sake of ‘success’; Habermas 1987: 180, 196), extant conditions suggest otherwise. As Foucault might put it, ethics (and one could add: theory) always come too late for power.

Here, one could elaborate on the relationship between action, on the one hand, and ideology, as well as power, on the other. Suffice it to say that ideology-critique

being regarded, traditionally, as part and parcel of critical theory – with a view to providing the theoretical grounds for disabusing subjects of ‘false consciousness’ or instrumentally ‘distorted (and distorting) communication’ – such ideology-critique must be presupposed for possible emancipatory action to follow. Similarly, unless it is accepted that critical theory is predicated on asymmetrical power-relations, its vaunted transformative power or emancipatory force would make little sense. This is why, as I shall argue below, psychoanalytic theory and practice offer a valuable analogical terrain for understanding the relationship between critical theory and social change through action of some sort. Against this backdrop, how should one understand the demise of (political, ethical) ‘action’ that could conceivably – but demonstrably has not – successfully subvert(ed) the dominant world order of neoliberal capitalism and its flipside, consumer culture?

2. Neoliberalism, technology and the eradication of desire by needs-satisfaction

There are numerous manifestations of the poverty of theory, referred to above; the triumph of neoliberalism globally, with the exception of a few pockets of resistance, signifies this weakness of theory, as does the phenomenon known as ‘post-theory’ (Žižek 2001: 1-9). The former arguably embodies a pessimism-inducing, cynical, concrete ‘refutation’ of the claim that theory is endowed with the resources to transform the world, or society, through a kind of emancipatory enlightenment – that is, enlightenment followed by emancipatory action – while post-theory (mainly so-called ‘cognitivism’) rejects the idea that (particularly Lacanian psychoanalytic) theory has epistemological value and efficacy. While I dismiss the naïve claims of post-theory (which is even, inexplicably, blind to the theoretical status of its own contra-theory claims), given the demonstrable role of theory as functioning as a kind of revealing ‘lens’, or perhaps a ‘diffracting prism’, for scrutinising cultural, social and natural reality (and therefore ‘elaborating’ on knowledge; for a demonstration of this, see Žižek 2001: 4-5; 31-54), the current hegemony of neoliberalism and its negative implications regarding the putative emancipatory role of theory should be taken more seriously. (In passing I should note that, as a critic has remarked, the global expansionist role of China should be taken as seriously; however, this does not vitiate my thesis, given that China, arguably a communist dictatorship, participates in the global capitalist order through its own version of ‘state capitalism’ [Žižek 2009]).

Why should it be taken seriously? It is just an economic system that human beings could desist from using whenever they choose to, is it not? That it is not that simple becomes apparent when one recalls that economic systems or practices are designed to satisfy human beings’ needs, and the more efficiently

this appears to be the case, the more difficult it would be to distance oneself from it. Furthermore, the economic system that structures the social world is at the very basis of the social milieu which shapes the subjectivities of people living in this social environment. Neoliberalism, or the currently hegemonic system, is particularly effective in covering up the possibility of other economic dispensations (Salecl 2010: 148-149; Pittaway 2017), which makes it all the more invidious, in light of the veritable absence of 'visible' alternatives. The chief means by which neoliberalism reinforces its grip on society is advanced information technology (Castells 2010; Stiegler 2015). Few people are in the position, or have the means, to be able to know just how detrimental the incremental control of our social environment – and our own feelings – by technological means really is. It is a process that is gradually extinguishing the very core of our being.

Our world is fast approaching its fictional counterpart depicted in George Orwell's *1984*, with the difference that ours does not, at first sight, appear to be totalitarian. And yet it is, albeit in a much subtler way. Canadian thinker Gilbert Germain homes in on this state of affairs in relation to the question of technology. Germain delivers a *tour de force* in this regard by contrasting a life cognisant of the need for experiencing the 'otherness' and 'open-endedness' of the world, on the one hand, with one that is hell-bent on eradicating such otherness and open-endedness in favour of 'sameness' (in the sense of being of human construction) and optimal control or predictability. His evocation of these two contrasting modes of life has the effect of opening one's eyes to the degree to which the latter is already being actualised today.

In *Thinking about Technology* (2017) Germain's striking approach to the relation between human needs-satisfaction and consumerist (neoliberal) capitalism and technology, focuses on the question concerning 'desire'. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, he argues (2017: 1-8), where Socrates converses with the sophist, Phaedrus, the former shows himself (and by implication all human beings) as being a 'lover', or in different terms, a creature of 'desire' – not in the exclusive sense of sexual desire (although that is one manifestation of it), but more fundamentally as that force which impels humans to strive towards some kind of fulfilment, with the corollary that the world, human society, and our personal lives are not 'all they could be' at any given time, but that there is always something 'more', and 'other' to strive towards. Put differently, humans constitutively 'lack' something, and this lack can never be conclusively eradicated by satisfying physical and psychic needs. (Plato's understanding of desire in this dialogue, as well as in others, such as the *Symposium*, anticipates the meaning that the notion has in psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Jacques Lacan; see Evans 1996: 36-39; Olivier 2009.) Referring to the setting of the *Phaedrus*, Germain elaborates on this as follows (2017: 22):

[...] the mise-en-scène of the *Phaedrus* is the great outdoors. This is true both literally and figuratively. The discourse about the nature of love and desire that unfolds out in the open itself is pervaded with the symbolism of openness. This openness is revealed in the etymology of the verb “desire” itself, with its celestial link to *de sidere* (of, or from, the stars). In desiring, we wish for or await what the stars will bring: We are open to what is not but what we wish to be. Desiring beings are therefore displaced beings. Socrates may have conceived himself as a creature of nature, but he understood that human nature is such that it holds within it a dimension that grounds it in something that transcends simple creaturely existence. What this “something” is is not of concern at this moment. Suffice it to say that from a Platonic perspective to be human is to reside in between mere animality (or life within the bounds of animal needs) and godliness (or life of fulfilled desire). In short, to be human is to yearn for something one does not have and cannot ever have—the repose that comes with total self-satisfaction. This unease is a given, and is both a blessing and a curse, since it defines what it means to be human but provides a definition that informs us self-satisfaction is not our lot.

Germain contrasts Plato’s account of what it means to be human, as embodied in Socrates’s nature as ‘lover’, with a contemporary (science-fictional) account – one that is completely incommensurate with that of Plato, and articulates the currently accepted belief about what it means to be human. In the short story, *Jon*, by George Saunders, we encounter a ‘utopian’ microcosm of modern consumer society which is predicated on the possibility of satisfying human needs via technological control to the point where they are self-sufficient beings. In a compound tellingly called the “Facility” we meet the eponymous Jon, who is one of the ‘product assessors’ living there, isolated from the less-than-perfect (but continually approximating consumerist perfection) world on the outside. As Germain notes, these ‘assessors’ can attain ‘rock-star’ status through their product assessment, and some do, inducing in them the impression that they live in consumer paradise. After all, every need on their part (including their emotional needs, via drugs resembling what we know as Prozac and its equivalents), is satisfied in a carefully controlled fashion through biochemical technology, and their assessments are used to improve the products they test and evaluate for being marketed in society outside the Facility. A largely successful attempt is even made to apply this to sex, by means of instructional videos where assessors are encouraged to masturbate in order to quell any potentially disrupting sexual needs or desires. This is the point about capitalist consumer paradise: technology

is employed to eradicate all needs – at least in appearance, because a fully satisfied consumer is anathema to capitalism; at best the semblance of satisfaction should be created. And the ‘erotic’, in the Socratic sense of an awareness of the chronic incompleteness of the human universe, is not allowed to enter here, because it would throw everything out of kilter. (I should note that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Germain, who employs the term, ‘desire[s]’ in his discussion of Plato and Saunders’s work, is really talking about ‘needs’ and not ‘desire[s]’. Moreover, I believe it is not only technology that is responsible for constructing a world without wants, as he avers; more fundamentally it is capitalism, using technology, as Stiegler convincingly indicates).

But the question is: *can* all human needs, let alone desire in the Platonic/Lacanian sense, be satisfied? Earlier I pointed to Plato’s and Lacan’s instructive insights into human ‘nature’ as being founded on ‘desire’(or ‘love’) that is, in principle, not satisfiable. George Saunders is clearly cognisant of this, because love (*Eros*) does intrude into this would-be utopia of satisfaction when a friend of Jon’s slips into the girls’ living quarters, has sex with one of them, and a pregnancy results in due course, culminating in the birth of Baby Amber. In the meantime Jon has followed suit, sleeping with the girl he loves (Carolyn), with identical consequences. When Baby Amber dies soon afterwards, Jon resorts to pharmaceutical control of his grief, suppressing it by means of Aurabon, but Carolyn refuses to do so, opening herself to the experience of unpredictable pain and disaster. Jon and Carolyn end up leaving the Facility for the less-than-ostensibly-perfect outside world, where Jon – while he is not entirely happy because he misses all the ‘cool’ stuff he got to assess, and keep, in the Facility– discovers what human life really means. As Germain paraphrases Saunders (2017, p. 29):

What has changed, however, is Jon’s sense that life beyond the confines of the Facility possesses a gravity not found within its walls. This weight is a consequence of his participating in an order of being marked by an open-endedness, in direct opposition to the closed and hyper-managed confines of the Facility. The world is *not* Jon’s to do with what he likes: It acts on him as much as he acts on it.

The disturbing aspect of Saunders’s short story is not merely its uncomfortably accurate depiction of modern society (albeit projected some years into the future) as one intent on exercising extreme managerial control over social life through technology, in the process tending towards the eradication of human (and humanising) desire. As Germain observes, Saunders is quite aware of the limiting effect of consumer culture on human language and thought, which is reflected in the somewhat stunted language Jon uses when he waxes lyrical about his

first sexual encounter. It could not be different, however; after all, his linguistic universe comprises the jargon of advertising and product assessment. Germain summarises this disturbing state of affairs as follows (2017, p. 26):

Saunders uses language to underscore the general point that there is no strict separation between our inner thoughts and feelings, on the one hand, and the world with which we interact, on the other. In short, our inner or private world is shown never to be entirely our own. Our ability to articulate thoughts and feelings—and to some extent even to have them—is shaped both by the nature of the social order we inhabit, and by the character of our relations with this order. It would be odd indeed, for instance, if living in a world given over to branding did not tend to elicit the production of truncated thoughts and caricatured feelings. And perhaps more importantly, and unsettling, nor should it be assumed that restrictions of this sort are recognized as such by language users.

To any teacher this would cast light on the noticeable deterioration of the language used by students, shaped as it is by our increasingly consumerist society. Nor are students equipped to notice this. Together with the tendency, to constrain, if not eradicate the erotic (in the Platonic sense), through its use of technology, I believe that capitalism is exacting an unconscionable price from humanity in light of the above. In the ancient world, as embodied in Plato's Socrates, there was no question about acknowledging human beings' status as erotic beings. Germain comments as follows (2017: 22):

The same cannot be said for us moderns. A curse rather than blessing, the erotic pull that draws us out of a state of complacency is deemed a problem in need of remediation... *Eros* for us is an evil that must be extirpated. Being 'in want' is anathema to the proper functioning of the social order. Anything that smacks of existential openness is contrary to the spirit of our times. It is for this reason that the air of openness that suffuses the *Phaedrus* is utterly absent in George Saunders's 'Jon,' at least initially. Through the lens of the short story's eponymous protagonist, Saunders supplies us with a picture of a closed universe whose end is the production of equally closed, unerotic, or self-satisfied beings.

It is my contention in the present paper that the set of social conditions described above, which comprises nothing less than a kind of (invisible) 'totalitarian' state of affairs, has been left to develop largely unhindered, despite critical theory being taught at many universities worldwide. In fact, critical theory

has failed miserably as far as preventing the suffocatingly monodimensional social sphere, known as neoliberal capitalist society, from being constructed and attaining hegemony. The following section is an attempt to demonstrate that neoliberalism is in fact the dominant social model.

3. Hardt and Negri on the 'common' and the need to act critically

What evidence is there, however, that neoliberal (consumer) capitalism reigns supreme in the early 21st Century, and, furthermore, that it is to the detriment of humankind? There are many research sources which confirm this, albeit ambiguously – that is, while simultaneously drawing attention to the many indications that resistance to neoliberalism is increasing (Federici 2013: 8; Verhaeghe 2014: location 2202-2339; Hawken 2007; Olivier 2015). Foremost among those who have gathered evidence of the hegemony of neoliberalism are the two redoubtable neo-Marxist thinkers, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who have done so in their monumental trilogy, *Empire* (2001), *Multitude* (2005) and *Commonwealth* (2009), followed by the more concise *Declaration* (2012). In *Empire* (2001) they outline the emergence of the newly hegemonic supranational world order juggernaut at several levels – including the political, economic, cultural and technological – showing that these are all intertwined today, and that it is well-nigh impossible to assign primacy to any of them. The states comprising *Empire* are the so-called (liberal) democratic states, which essentially means those states that are driven by neoliberal capitalist economies comprising the hegemonic global economic system. What their analysis further means is that the primacy of the political sphere as the locus of power has disappeared, given its intertwinement with the economic. Far from what used to be thought of as the 'minimal' role of the state in capitalism, the political and the economic are virtually indistinguishable today, except in name, given the thorough penetration of politics by economic imperatives and *vice versa*. As Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 34-35) indicate in their work, ('deterritorialising') capitalism cannot do without the ('reterritorialising') function of the state to secure its gains, through legislation, for example.

Multitude (2005) marks their account of the state of constant war in the present so-called 'democratic' world, as well as of the protests against and resistance to this fraught state of affairs by the emergent force they dub 'multitude'. What is of particular interest here is their characterisation of 'multitude' as simultaneously universal and particular – universal in respect of the resistance to *Empire* by everyone it comprises across the world, regardless of nationality, race or gender, and particular insofar as everyone constituting 'multitude' is marked

by irreducible *difference*. This aspect of their work resonates with that of Naomi Klein (2014: 254) in *This Changes Everything*, especially where she describes the growing resistance to capitalism globally in the guise of what is known as 'Blockadia', comprising people of diverse origin and profession, as well as with Paul Hawken's (2007) discernment of what he dubs the 'largest social movement in history', comprising millions of people globally, united in their opposition to the present economic system, or more broadly, the present way of life under capitalism. One could add the important work of Manuel Castells here, particularly on the 'cultures' that have arisen in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008 (Castells et al. 2012), as evidence for the claim that capitalism has outlived its general acceptance as the preferred economic system.

Hardt and Negri's *Commonwealth* (2009: xiii) is predicated on the possibility that 'the common' – not just in the sense of common interests that should motivate a concerted effort on the part of people to work towards the realisation of these in a well-structured manner – in the most fundamental sense of clean air, arable soil, drinkable water and the bounty of nature, should be freely accessible to everyone. This is exactly where Hardt and Negri reveal their true radicality, though. To these 'commons' they add the fruits of scientific and technological progress; in brief, all knowledge and information produced in the context of the information revolution (2009: viii). These should be accessible to all people, not only to those with power and/or money. What they are advocating is true 'open source' status of all knowledge, instead of it being hogged by private corporations and governments. Predictably, their target is private property, which stands in the way to a complete reconstruction of the political sphere. In the interest of the common, things should not be privatised, in their estimation. In their words (2009: viii):

With the blinders of today's dominant ideologies...it is difficult to see the common, even though it is all around us. Neoliberal government policies throughout the world have sought in recent decades to privatize the common, making cultural products – for example, information, ideas, and even species of animals and plants – into private property. We argue, in chorus with many others, that such privatization should be resisted... (p. ix)...so much of our world is common, open to access of all and developed through active participation. Language, for example, like affects and gestures, is for the most part common, and indeed if language were made either private or public – that is, if large portions of our words, phrases, or parts of speech were subject to private ownership or public authority – then language would lose its powers of expression [much like the language

used in the consumerist 'Facility' of Saunders's story, or the 'Newspeak' of Orwell's *1984*], creativity, and communication.

What is crucial for the question, above, of theory's capacity to lead to enlightened action, is Hardt and Negri's (2009: 31) dependence on Foucault's (1980; 1995) notion of 'biopolitical' production – that is, the claim that we live at a time when we no longer witness the production, *primarily*, of consumer goods. Of course these are still being produced, but what turns the wheels of capitalism today is (even more fundamentally than the information economy) the production of subjectivities, and that means bodies which behave in a certain way, because, for Foucault, the 'soul' (one's subjectivity) is the 'prison' of the body. This explains why theory falters in the face of the 'capture', by capitalism, of individuals' subjectivities and their behaviour today. Biopolitical production here means that new ways of shaping the actions of human beings occur under capitalism, with the consequence that their very way of living reinforces capitalism all the time, ostensibly guaranteeing its perpetuation (2009: 56–61).

It is not difficult to understand what this means. In the first place biopolitical production means that people living today are in the process of being 'produced' in such a way that they can adapt successfully to the way that capitalism functions. Think of the manner that mainstream psychological counselling enables one to 'cope' with the demands of consumer society; and compare this to Lacan's opposition (captured in the phrase 'against adaptation'; see Van Haute 2002) to mainstream psychology, which merely assists the subject to 'adapt' to an alienated and alienating society. If this seems far-fetched, ponder the implications of the familiar exhortation, to 'brand' or 'rebrand' yourself; that is, deliberately turn yourself into a 'commodity for sale'. Only people who have been thoroughly brainwashed by consumerist capitalism would fail to realise that this surrender to the cynical 'anthropology of competitiveness' reduces their human freedom to virtually zero. And yet, people seem to be quite happy to market themselves as commodities, blissfully unaware of the fact that they are participating in their own liquidation as 'human' beings capable of freedom of thought and action.

Secondly, think of the many courses on 'compliance' of some sort or other to which employees are regularly subjected. This is the way that capitalism rules – not through conspicuous fascist dictatorship, but via subtle invasion of people's psyches, to rule them from within, as it were (Verhaeghe 2014). What makes a mockery of those claims – on the part of Habermas, for instance – that the social sciences are 'emancipatory' (that is, that social scientific research is guided by the 'interest' to free people in society), is the fact that people today happily 'comply' with, and assent to, their own biopolitical production (and therefore liquidation) into docile cogs in the machine of neoliberalism, which assimilates

all that is personal to the domain of economic production and commodification. This makes one realise what a misnomer neoliberalism really is, inscribing the word for liberty into it: consumers are only really free to turn themselves into exemplary subjects of capitalist production, beginning with themselves; 'Shop till you drop!' is a misleading metonymy of this way of living, because it turns our gaze away from ourselves towards consumerist behaviour. The victory of capitalism over the human spirit is almost – but not quite – complete; some of us are still holding out. As Lyotard reminded us in *The Inhuman* (1991), there is an 'inhuman' in every person that potentially resists all attempts at colonisation, including the neoliberal. But it is up to each person to activate this. After all, Foucault, too, champions the 'resistance of bodies' as a prerequisite for a human quality of living.

In *Declaration* (2012), a far terser statement of their position than their trilogy, Hardt and Negri describe the subjectivities that are being biopolitically produced today – the 'indebted', the 'mediatised', the 'securitised', and the 'represented' – all of which are essential for the rule of neoliberalism to succeed. The first of these (the 'indebted') is familiar to all of us, and the Occupy Wall Street movement is symptomatic of its effect on resisting bodies, that is, on eliciting resistance on the part of bodies. Think of the majority of young people of today (even ones with university degrees), slaving away at 'jobs' with hardly any hope of being truly 'independent' one day, or even being able to have their own houses. Indebtedness is a very effective way of keeping people docile and controlled.

The 'mediatised' include all of us, given our dependence on the media for information, and, importantly, for our actions, which are consequently 'mediatised'. The 'securitised' also applies to us all, given our subjection to security searches at airports, to camera surveillance in shopping malls, but most importantly, in the sense of the imperatives of security inescapably being part and parcel of our subjectivities, so that one is constantly aware of 'the need for security'. The 'represented' is the most pathetic figure of them all, insofar as it confirms that most people today have become almost completely apolitical; after all, are they not 'represented' by their 'representatives' (who only really represent their own interests, and, importantly, those of capital: governments today serve corporations and banks, that is, the agencies of capital). All in all, these four subjectivities not only mark the triumph of neoliberalism, but also the failure of theory – even 'critical' theory as represented by Habermas and others – to function as the effective basis for enlightened, emancipatory action.

This explains Hardt and Negri's insistence, in *Commonwealth* (2009: 15-18), that it is not enough to *think* critically; one must learn to *act* critically, too, to be able to actualise the demands of freedom. In their criticism of what they call the

“republic of property”, and *en route* to the conceptualisation of a social democracy which lends itself to the actual transformation of the social and political *status quo* – instead of restricting itself to lip-service to it – they turn to, among others, Immanuel Kant’s thought on enlightenment. This may seem to be improbable – after all, Kant is hardly known as a theoretician of the revolution. This fact notwithstanding, they argue along Deleuze-Guattarian lines that a “minor voice” is audible in Kant’s work alongside the “major voice” of the philosopher of the transcendental method, who uncovered the conditions of possibility, not only of certain knowledge of the law-governed phenomenal world, but in so doing also, by implication, of a life of dutiful social and political responsibility that leaves existing power relations as they are.

This “minor voice” therefore points, according to them, towards an alternative to the modern power complex that finds affirmation in Kant’s “major voice”. The minor Kantian text – titled “What is enlightenment?” – represents, according to Hardt and Negri, the “minor voice” of the revolutionary Kant. Crucially, they draw attention to Kant’s appropriation of the motto, taken from Horace, to wit, “Sapere aude!” (“Dare to know!”) as being suitable for expressing the meaning of “enlightenment”, but at the same time they shrewdly point to the very ambiguous manner in which this motto is developed in Kant’s short text. On the one hand one cannot detect much daring in Kant’s encouragement of citizens to do “their duty” obediently as citizens entrusted with carrying out different tasks (soldiers, ministers of religion, civil servants) and paying their taxes to the sovereign, whatever private misgivings they may have about these. Here the two authors of *Commonwealth* see Kant as affirming the European rationalist tradition that construed the Enlightenment as a process in which the emendation of reason was (and still is) carried out. Needless to emphasise, such an approach amounts to the strengthening of the social and political *status quo*.

On the other hand, however, they claim that Kant himself creates the opening for reading this enlightenment exhortation (2009: 17):

[...] against the grain: ‘dare to know’ really means at the same time also ‘know how to dare’. This simple inversion indicates the audacity and courage required, along with the risks involved, in thinking, speaking, and acting autonomously. This is the minor Kant, the bold, daring Kant, which is often hidden, subterranean, buried in his texts, but from time to time breaks out with a ferocious, volcanic, disruptive power. Here reason is no longer the foundation of duty that supports established social authority but rather a disobedient, rebellious force that breaks through the fixity of the present and discovers the new. Why, after all, should

we dare to think and speak for ourselves if these capacities are only to be silenced immediately by a muzzle of obedience?

A discourse analysis of Kant's essay confirms their reading. His use of words such as "courage", "cowardice", "dare", "danger", in such statements as the following, where he elaborates on the reasons for humankind's "self-incurred tutelage", is telling in this regard (Kant 1959: 85–86):

After the guardians [i.e. authorities of all kinds] have first made their domestic cattle dumb and have made sure that these placid creatures will not dare take a single step without the harness of the cart to which they are tethered, the guardians then show them the danger which threatens if they try to go alone. Actually, however, this danger is not so great, for by falling a few times they would finally learn to walk alone.

One might even read these words of the mild philosopher of Königsberg as an incipient manifesto for political anarchism — that is, the position that humans do not need governments, because they are quite capable of governing themselves, once they have gathered the courage to do so. And when Kant observes pointedly, towards the end of the essay, that there is a correlation between the free public use, on the part of citizens, of their powers of reasoning for debating all manner of topics — contentious (such as religion) or otherwise — and the enlightenment of the sovereign (who therefore need not be "afraid of shadows"), the radical implication is clear. If the sovereign does not submit himself or herself to the same rational rules that govern the actions of citizens, the latter need not feel bound to obey such a sovereign any longer. That is, rebellion is justified when authorities themselves do not act reasonably, but, by implication, unjustifiably.

In sum, what the 'minor' Kant could teach anyone who is receptive, if Hardt and Negri are right, concerns the necessity of distinguishing between two kinds of thought and action. Regardless of the 'freedom of thought and expression' which may accompany it, the first kind would leave the established political, social and economic order intact, even were such an order one of injustice. And even if this seems to be an instance of 'dare to think for yourself', it would amount to no more than venting one's frustration or sense of indignation, because it would lack that other element singled out by Hardt and Negri's reading of Kant, namely 'think (or know) how to dare!' The latter would inaugurate the second kind of thought and action, which does not shy away from acting in such a manner that an unjust order is rejected and resisted at all levels, such that one's autonomy is clearly manifested.

Such a 'minor' way of thinking *and* acting would certainly carry tremendous risk, because it would fly in the face of the established, dominant order, where

political, economic and administrative (bureaucratic) imperatives combine to keep citizens in a state of docility — or, to use the currently fashionable term, ‘compliance’. I stress the *and*, because freedom of expression is not enough; it has to be combined with action of the kind that, perhaps subtly, subverts what Foucault (1995) called the “disciplinary mechanisms” which reduce people to “docile bodies” — bodies which are economically productive and politically powerless. Resistance to the unjust dominant order has to begin at the level of bio-politically resisting or acting bodies — theory, by itself, is powerless to bring fundamental change, as Hardt and Negri (2009: 18-21) proceed to argue in *Commonwealth*, lambasting what they see as impotent social democratic theory on the part of theorists such as Habermas and Rawls.

Those who are at a loss regarding effective modes of resistance could think of the many instances of protest witnessed in the early 21st Century — protests which, as Hardt and Negri show, with plenty of supporting evidence (in their earlier text, *Multitude*; 2005), have multiplied across the globe, and are still increasing in the face of the forces of what they call Empire. But one need not think only of clearly visible political protest. Every time one succeeds in evading the kind of bureaucracy designed to induce docility in subjects — such as all the superfluous administration expected of teachers in the OBE system of education, which takes the place of what could be edifying, enriching teaching — you are chalking up a small victory against the constricting administrative forces of Empire, because you have dared to do so, to *act*. It is indeed possible, even if one does not always succeed in convincing ‘authorities’ that one’s time is better spent on creative teaching and research activities from which students and staff can also benefit, than on the endless, sterile filling in of forms, or ‘counting of beans’. But what are the prospects of *action* in the political sense, today? Hannah Arendt’s work is pertinent in this regard.

4. Action

There is a reason for Hannah Arendt’s (1998: 14) distinction between the *vita activa* (life of action) and the *vita contemplativa* or *bios theoretikos* (life of contemplation). First, the *vita activa*, for Arendt, includes the three activities of ‘labour’, ‘work’ and ‘action’ (1998: 7), where the first of these designates the labouring necessary for the biological condition of humanity to be sustained and to continue; the second refers to the work activity of artisans and artists that results in the construction of an ‘artificial’ cultural environment (of buildings and other artefacts); and the third — and most important, for Arendt — denotes the truly humanising “political” activity of humans, which corresponds to the “condition

of plurality” that is distinctively human. Arendt expresses this paradoxical state of affairs (which is also recognised by psychoanalysis) as follows (1998: 8):

Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.

This “unique distinctness” manifests itself in “[s]peech and action”, according to Arendt (1998: 176), insofar as these enable humans to “distinguish themselves” through “initiative” which, for Arendt, is an indispensable condition for being truly human – something that is only true of the dyad, action and speech, and not of the other two components of the *vita activa*, namely labour and work. As she says (1998: 176):

Men can very well live without laboring, they can force others to labor for them, and they can very well decide merely to use and enjoy the world of things without themselves adding a single useful object to it...A life without speech and without action, on the other hand – and this is the only way of life that in earnest has renounced all appearance and all vanity in the biblical sense of the word – is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.

It is significant that Arendt (1998: 177) reminds her readers that “action” is related to “beginning” and to “freedom” insofar as every human being is (equally) capable of beginning something anew, and simultaneously marks the instantiation of freedom in the world; after all, to begin or initiate something via speech and action implies that it was not there before, and could not be expected to have resulted from what went before (1998: 178). Moreover, she reminds one (1998: 179):

No other human performance requires speech to the same extent as action. In all other performances speech plays a subordinate role, as a means of communication or a mere accompaniment to something that could also be achieved in silence.

This resonates with Jacques Rancière’s (1999: 22–23) insistence that everyone, including those whose part is ‘no part’ of the body politic (such as slaves or helots in antiquity), can legitimately claim political or democratic ‘equality’, as long as they actively demonstrate their participation in the *logos*, that is, their ability to speak. In other words, where people rebel against their subjugation, sheer, mute violence is not sufficient to legitimise their claim to equality. In concert with Arendt, Rancière perceives in speech a capacity that plays an integral role in (political) action.

What strikes one about her analysis (1998: 13-14) of the historical place and meaning of 'action', is Arendt's insight into the change that occurred between its ancient significance and the modern era. In Antiquity, unlike the other two components of the *vita activa*, namely labour and work, 'action' alone denoted activities that manifested human freedom; only in properly 'political' speech and action could otherwise 'equal' humans be said to be *free*, because the other two concepts related to activities performed out of necessity (without labour one would not survive, and without the culturally constructive role of work one would be left unsheltered, destitute). In addition to action, of course, the *bios theoretikos* or contemplative life *also* signified freedom – in fact, Arendt reminds one, in the work of Plato and Aristotle, it was granted a superior position regarding freedom compared to the 'action' of the *vita activa*, an evaluation that would persist into mediaeval times. It is particularly in late antiquity – the Hellenistic era – that political activity or 'action' was seen as detracting from the freedom to contemplate (Arendt 1998: 14-15), and, Foucault (1988) would add, to 'care for the self' in rigorous ethical terms.

In passing one should note the paradox that traditionally the *vita contemplativa* or theory bestowed on the concept of the *vita activa* its meaning (1998: 16), and Arendt's book is no exception in this regard. What is exceptional, though, is that, instead of turning the hierarchy, which subordinates action to theory, on its head, as Marx and Nietzsche famously did in the 19th Century, she refuses the hierarchy altogether – anticipating Derrida's deconstructive manoeuvre in the process – arguing that the hierarchical schema itself remained intact with Marx and Nietzsche (Arendt 1998: 16-17). In her words (1998: 17):

The modern reversal shares with the traditional hierarchy the assumption that the same central human preoccupation must prevail in all activities of men, since without one comprehensive principle no order could be established. This assumption is not a matter of course, and my use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*.

In her elaboration of the place of action (or what she also calls 'doing') in modernity, Arendt (1998: 289-291) points out that the reversal of the hierarchical relationship between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* is probably the most "momentous", because uniquely unavoidable, of the modern age. This follows from Galileo's scientifically established confirmation of Copernicus's and others' more speculative hypotheses regarding the astronomical place and movement of the earth in the modern age, as well as Descartes's initiation of "Cartesian doubt",

which had the consequence of making the sensibly given world, and eventually the 'transcendent' world, too, "disappear" (1998: 288–289).

If this seems opaque, Arendt urges her readers to recall that, contrary to the preceding age, in the course of developments in modernity, 'doing', in the guise of scientifically (experimentally) demonstrated confirmation of knowledge claims, was established as the true locus of knowledge, instead of contemplation. The latter, she says, is not the same as 'thinking', which was regarded as 'handmaiden' to philosophical contemplation in antiquity, and to theology in its mediaeval counterpart, characterised as it is by a certain 'passive' contemplation (or 'reception', perhaps) of eternal truths that thinking uncovered. In contrast to this understanding of knowledge and truth, the practice of experimental science in the modern era demonstrated – in the wake of Galilean experimentation and Cartesian doubt regarding the physical and the transcendent worlds – that humanity could henceforth only trust knowledge and truth that resulted from their own 'doing'. (Needless to emphasise, critical theory also participates, at least putatively, in this shift from 'knowing' to 'doing'.) The epistemological consequence of these developments has therefore been a firm prioritisation of the *vita activa*, in the form of 'doing' or action, over the *vita contemplativa*, although 'doing' (action) is here no longer understood in a *political* sense, as it was in antiquity, but in a pragmatic-epistemological sense. Edmund Husserl (1965: 169) also alludes to this modification in the relation between theory and practice, describing it as a "synthesis of theoretical universality and a practical outlook with universal interests".

In fact, it appears that Arendt is fairly pessimistic about the prospects, in the contemporary world, of 'action' in the political sense – as characterised above – which reached its apogee, for her, among the ancient Greeks. This is related to her understanding of modern science and its offspring, modern technology (the relationship between which she conceives of in the same manner as her erstwhile teacher, Martin Heidegger), and in a passage where she anticipates with great foresight the radical contemporary critique of technology on the part of Bernard Stiegler (e.g. 2015), she observes (Arendt 1998: 3):

If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and [philosophical] thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is.

However, even apart from these last and yet uncertain consequences, the situation created by the sciences is of great

political significance. Wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being. If we would follow the advice, so frequently urged upon us, to adjust our cultural attitudes to the present status of scientific achievement, we would in all earnest adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful. For the sciences today have been forced to adopt a 'language' of mathematical symbols which, though it was originally meant only as an abbreviation for spoken statements, now contains statements that in no way can be translated back into speech. The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judgment of scientists *qua* scientists is not primarily their lack of 'character' – that they did not refuse to develop atomic weapons – or their naïveté – that they did not understand that once these weapons were developed they would be the last to be consulted about their use – but precisely the fact that they move in a world where speech has lost its power. And whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about.

One should not misunderstand Arendt here: in the rest of what she writes, as indeed in the passage quoted, she leaves one in no doubt that what she means amounts to a denial of the once vital bond that existed (in antiquity) between *action* and *speech* (1998: 176), insofar as it applies to a collectivity of people with properly shared political interests – something that, in the light of her remarks cited above, is no longer viable. If one considers that Arendt's book first appeared in 1958, it is not difficult to guess how much the already politically fraught situation of that time has deteriorated today (one could point to many thinkers who confirm this, for example Derrida in *Specters of Marx* [1994] or *Archive Fever* [1995], let alone Stiegler in *States of Shock* [2015] and Kristeva [2000; 2002] in her work on 'revolt'), and it will be my argument in this paper that what Arendt conceives of as 'action' is in an almost irreparable state of dereliction in the contemporary ('postmodern') age, and that critical theory has contributed virtually nothing to remedying this state of affairs, despite its vaunted capacity to promote 'emancipatory' practice (compare Habermas's claims regarding the 'emancipatory' interest of the critical social sciences in his early work, for example; Habermas 1971).

In this respect I would argue that Arendt's notion of 'alienation' in the modern era – that the prerequisite for scientific and technological advances was the *alienation*, or fatal distancing between humanity and the world (Arendt 1998; Olivier 1977) – has assumed a different, arguably more serious guise today, namely the alienation of humanity from its potential for 'action' in the Arendtian sense.

In passing, to confirm the demise of action in the political sense, it is interesting to note that the “process character” of (political) action has been transferred to the ‘process of production’ characteristic of the triumphant *homo faber* of the modern age – not surprisingly because, at the most fundamental ontological level, Arendt (1998: 296–297) points out (referring to Whitehead), “the concept of Process” has replaced that of “Being”. As Arendt (1998: 306) summarily states, among the “typical attitudes” of *homo faber* one finds the “matter-of-course identification of fabrication with action”.

Returning for the moment to the relationship between theory and action or practice, one might see in Edmund Husserl’s (1965: 169) contention, that theory has become fused with a kind of praxis, a theory-*apologetic* echo of Marx’s and Nietzsche’s reversal of the traditional hierarchy, although it seems more likely that – coming after Heidegger’s epoch-making *Being and Time* of 1927 (1978) – it was Husserl’s self-justifying response to his erstwhile pupil’s astounding prioritisation of a fundamentally praxis-oriented category, namely ‘care’, over reason as *Dasein*’s crucial ontological feature. Yet, on closer inspection one finds that his establishment of an umbilical cord between theory and practice echoes Arendt’s diagnosis of the evolution of action in the political sense to a new pragmatic-epistemological (–scientific) meaning of the term (Husserl 1965: 174):

By virtue of the demand to subject the whole of experience to ideal norms, i.e., those of unconditional truth, there results at the same time an all-embracing change in the practical order of human existence and thus of cultural life in its entirety. The practical must no longer take its norms from naïve everyday experience and from tradition but from the objective truth. In this way ideal truth becomes an absolute value that in the movement of education and in its constant application in the training of children carries with it a universal revision of practice.

On the other hand, Derrida’s (1986) deconstruction of the putative opposition between theory and practice (or praxis), for example when two detractors accused him of being powerless to change anything with his ‘irrelevant’ deconstructions (which supposedly remain confined within the ‘text’ in the literal sense – a complete misunderstanding of the metaphorical sense of the term as ‘anything that is interpretable’), specifically of the word ‘apartheid’, does nothing to vitiate Arendt’s distinction between theory (a product of contemplation) and action or praxis (which belongs to the *vita activa*). On the contrary, it resonates with Arendt’s position, that there is no hierarchy; only mutually implicating difference. Moreover, he reminds his critics, theory (as writing) has practical effects as action or “active interventions”, in the process validating Arendt’s emphasis on modern science or theory as ‘doing’ (Derrida 1986: 168):

That's why de-constructive readings and writings are concerned not only with library books, with discourses, with conceptual and semantic contents. They are not simply analyses of discourse such as, for example, the one you propose. They are also effective or active (as one says) interventions, in particular political and institutional interventions that transform contexts without limiting themselves to theoretical or constative utterances even though they must also produce such utterances.

One needs to add, however, that such interventions do not follow as a matter of course from the theory or writing in question, which is why Derrida (1986: 168) urges his readers to take up the fight against apartheid, as he has done. In Husserl's case there is also the upshot that theory implicates praxis, insofar as theory prepares culturally interpellated human beings for a certain kind of action; but again, the action (which is not conceived in political terms, as already noted), requires what Husserl (above) calls "application", that is, implementation by human beings. For the arch-phenomenologist the very integrity of modernity or modern culture (in the middle-1930s) depended upon a certain (phenomenological) approach in the sciences, which would putatively bring their universal foundations (and with them the foundations of western cultural practices) into view, and provide a new, unshakeable epistemological base for practice. For Derrida, the very fact that his earlier paper on apartheid (titled 'Racism's last word', originally a short essay accompanying an touring exhibition on apartheid; Derrida 1986: 157) had the demonstrable efficacy of prompting his critics into challenging his argument in the same journal (*Critical Inquiry*) where Derrida's earlier paper had appeared, confirmed his claim of having 'deconstructed' the line of demarcation supposedly separating theory and practice: theory gave rise to practice on the part of readers who interpreted it a certain way, which, inversely, presupposes theory and practice in an intimate implicatory embrace of mutual intertwinement. *But* this quasi-complicity between the two does not undermine Arendt's distinction between them in the guise of contemplation and action; that is, her claim that they are distinct (albeit axiologically 'equal' or 'undecidable') phenomena – after all, whether theory lays, or perhaps rather uncovers, the foundations of cultural practice (Husserl), or has the effect of initiating writing and other kinds of activity on the part of critics (Derrida), in both cases the actions concerned are distinct from (albeit 'connected' with) the theory.

What interests me here is precisely the distinctness of the two concepts, or rather, what they denote, because I shall argue that, although it is from the perspective of *theory* (contemplation) that this distinctness between itself and *action* is discerned – and notwithstanding the fact that Derrida's writing provoked the praxis-oriented response, in writing, from his interlocuting

detractors – there is *no* necessary, ‘apodictic’ or guaranteed continuity or ‘linking mechanism’ between the two. *Theory*, including critical theory, with its putative emancipatory efficacy, is in fact *powerless* to effect (critically efficacious) *action* without the *primary* mediating agency of individual subjects (even if such action could be taken to a collective level). At best, theory can ‘prepare’ one for it, as one learns, by analogy, from ‘thinking’ in a neglected sense of the term, and from psychoanalytic theory, as I shall argue below – first with reference to the university, and then to instances of critical action and to the clinic.

5. The university

Earlier I referred to the critique of technology by Bernard Stiegler. He can also be invoked in support of my claim that the contemporary university is one of the sites (the other being the clinic) which *could* ‘prepare’ one for critical action as described above, provided it were able to regain the position of institutions where students learn how to *think*. ‘Thinking’, Stiegler reminds one, has distinctive characteristics, contrary to what most people naively believe, and it is the university, *par excellence*, where this is, or at least should be, encountered. Today, Stiegler points out in *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century* (2015: location 286), universities are unable to fulfil their responsibilities in this regard; in fact, they are failing as institutions introducing students to learning at the highest level, constantly renewed by ongoing research on the part of faculty members. This is due, to a large extent, to the fact that universities do not include in their programme of education and research a sustained, critical attempt to understand and address the effects of the use of advanced technologies on human reason. Information technology is not just an innocuous tool, without any notable effect on the way its users think and act; it is a different memory system, external to its users, and supplements their internal memory, which is essentially labile. I use ‘supplement’ here in the familiar Derridean sense (Derrida 1967: 141-152) of that supposedly superfluous ‘addition’ which something could ‘really do without’, but in the absence of which it would not be what it is (‘woman’ being a ‘dangerous’ supplement to ‘man’, and ‘writing’ an unreliable supplement to ‘speech’, for instance), and which, moreover, fundamentally affects what it is supposed to be an innocuous addition to – witness the growing inability of people to do without their smartphones, tablets, GPSs and so on (see Olivier 2014).

Therefore, to be able to regain the condition of ‘enlightenment’ – knowledge of the world we live in and the critical-reflective ability to *act* on such knowledge, so as to retain one’s rational sovereignty – what Stiegler (2015: location 348) calls the “rearming of thought” has to proceed via the theorising and “enlightened” practice regarding the digital technologies of today, and universities are failing

in their duty to do this. He sums up this lamentable state of affairs as follows, connecting what I have summarised above with a broader economic and political field (2015: location 286):

Western universities are in the grip of a deep malaise, and a number of them have found themselves, through some of their faculty [a reference to the economics professors in the US who were implicated in triggering the global financial crisis in 2008; BO], giving consent to – and sometimes considerably compromised by – the implementation of a financial system that, with the establishment of hyper-consumerist, drive-based and ‘addictogenic’ society, leads to economic and political ruin on a global scale. If this has occurred, it is because their goals [the enlightenment of humanity through self-critical knowledge; BO], their organizations and their means have been put entirely at the service of the destruction of sovereignty.

Unlike the vast majority of so-called ‘philosophers’ (including ‘critical theorists’) in the world, Stiegler does not hesitate to indict the real culprit in the demise of higher education, namely hyper-industrial, addictogenic techno-capitalism, and to show the futility of universities ‘engaging’ a society already compromised by uncritical surrender to the imperatives of consumption. In the process universities neglect their primary duty, to educate this techno-addicted society. In light of the question raised by Stiegler (2015) on the pervasive ‘stupidity’ characterising global societies today, and the failure of universities to live up to their historical task under present circumstances, one might wonder what universities could do to remedy the situation in contemporary, ‘hyperindustrial’ society.

It is in this context that Stiegler believes the university to have failed, and to be failing, as can be seen in the fact that, as he argues in *States of Shock* (2015), neither in schools nor at universities do students acknowledge the knowledge of their teachers and professors any longer. The question is then: what can and should universities do to regain their former position as institutions of higher learning, where the archives of knowledge in various disciplines form the basis of teaching? As intimated above, the first thing to realise is that no university or school can reclaim its proper role without taking seriously what it means to ‘think’. Most people would probably dismiss this statement – doesn’t everyone know what ‘thinking’ means, or is? I would challenge such a dismissal, as would Stiegler, Derrida, Deleuze, Heidegger, Levinas, Kant and every philosopher who has ever taken it seriously. Routine observations in the press or in conversation, such as that ‘the world economy is heading for a recession’, that ‘Trump has started a trade war’, and so on, is *not* thinking in the sense that I mean here. Thinking in the true sense is always ‘against the grain’. In the title of his collection

of essays, *Holzwege* (translated as *Off the Beaten Track*; 2002), Martin Heidegger famously used the striking metaphor of '*Holzwege*' ('forest paths') to distinguish conventional (non-)thinking from true thinking, where these paths, made by woodcutters, would have to be painstakingly made, without damaging the forest, and by respecting the trees and underbrush by working around them, in contrast with a highway made through a forest by simply cutting everything down that stood in its way. The highway represents conventional (non-)thinking, of course, and it is not the university's task to travel only on the highway; it is precisely its duty to teach students to think 'against the grain', exploring the forest while respecting it, that is, the nature of reality. Stiegler articulates this in terms of 'reason' (2015: location 5467):

Reason is formed. Every human being is reason-able, but their capacity for reason must be formed. The formation or training of reason (*Bildung*) passes through disciplines. The disciplines through which reason is formed are themselves schools of thought. They emerge from a process of transindividuation in which the experiences of thinking of the individual researchers who have left their mark in the history of these disciplines constitute a body of knowledge shared and criticized by a community of peers, and recognized as such.

Reason is the attentional form emerging from those processes of transindividuation that result in rational disciplines. In general terms, an attentional form is a way of articulating retentions and protentions [terms used by Husserl in his phenomenology of the structure of time-consciousness; BO]. The forms of knowledge deriving from the heritage in which a discipline of *logos* consists – such that this *logos* is formed in those potentially rational minds that schools address, from the elementary level to the doctoral level where it is transformed – are composed of such retentions [that is, what has been retained from the past history of the discipline; BO]. And the new forms of knowledge that a discipline seeks and aims at through its researchers (in graduate schools) are its protentions [that is, knowledge aimed at, and preparing for, the future; BO] – those protentions that it is possible to project on the basis of these retentions [even if they were to be questioned; BO].

Stiegler identifies reason here as an "attentional form", which brings one to the crux of the matter concerning universities' recuperation today. As he reminds one, the present age is known, paradoxically, as one of "the *attention economy*", which should really be called "an attention *dis-economy*" (2015: location 5481). Why? Because, he proceeds to point out, the attention of students at school and university alike "...seems to be exclusively captured and depleted by an industrial

apparatus designed essentially for this purpose, which is the very reason it has been named the ‘attention economy’”.

For Stiegler the task facing universities is therefore closely tied up with what I mentioned earlier, namely posing the question anew, what it means to ‘think’, because thinking is clearly not involved in the hyper-(non-)attention required by the operation of the ‘external memory’ digital machines, such as smartphones, of today. What is called thinking in philosophy is a very specific form of *sustained attention*. Stiegler elaborates on thinking as follows (2015: location 5494):

To think is to participate in the production of an attentional form. What must be thought today, however, and this is a trait specific to our age, is the fact that attention has become the major stake of a global economic war of unprecedented violence....and the fact that this war is taking place in schools. And it is a war against school itself insofar as schooling is first and foremost a struggle against the destruction of attention, and in general a struggle with minds insofar as they are capable of reasoning.

As the last sentence indicates, Stiegler regards people generally as being ‘capable of reasoning’. He is *not* just another technophobe who cannot deal with advanced technics or doubts the rationality of the people who use it. Since the publication of his first book (*Technics and Time*, Vol. 1; 1998), he has argued that one cannot conceive of humans except as being essentially technological beings, or creatures that are marked by their use of technical prostheses – it is no accident that language and technics developed together. His concern with the present global situation, however, is that human beings (especially the young) are losing their ability to use technics *critically*, that is, without succumbing to the deleterious effects of allowing the technical apparatus (as a tool of the dominant economic system of neoliberal capitalism) to manipulate young minds by capturing their attention. In fact, Stiegler (2010: 21; 2015: locations 514, 921-1147, 2777-2853, 6810, 7501) champions the ‘critical intensification’ of the use of external memory technics – that is, using smartphones, tablets and laptops to enhance, instead of destroy, attention and critical thinking, the way I am using my laptop as I type this sentence.

Just think of the way that one is able to gain access to numerous sources of critical reflection on the internet, in the guise of e-books, e-journals and so on, and not only those websites where the dominant culture industry peddles its addictogenic devices, websites and images of celebrity culture. It is Stiegler’s project to promote such a critical employment of technical devices, in the process also advancing the practice of ‘thinking’ anew. Universities are in the forefront of tackling this task, which would simultaneously entail the process of their

recuperation (Stiegler 2015: location 5494). Failing this, people will continue being fascinated by technology in the guise of the smartphone (and other equivalent devices), merely exposing themselves to the pre-formatted neoliberal 'lifestyles' metonymically implicated in electronically mediated mainstream information and iconography. Importantly, however, the site of the university remains potentially available for the resurrection of 'thinking' on the part of particularly young people, on condition that university teachers find ways of introducing them to the emancipatory rewards of this much-neglected human capacity. For 'thinking' – the ability to 'think' (or 'reason') – constitutes an indispensable 'preparation' for critical *action*, insofar as it refuses the easy surrender to the flow of mainstream 'information', thinking 'against the grain' instead. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this in a political-economic system where everything is subject to commodification – even critical theory, which could conceivably be marketed to so-called 'yuppies' under the banner of a 'must-have' certificate, received upon completing a two-day critical theory-seminar, for instance. 'Thinking' as specified here is per definition 'critical' in the etymological sense derived from the ancient Greek verb, 'krei', which (according to the Online Etymology Dictionary) means 'to sieve, discriminate, distinguish' – arguably something that must be presupposed by any 'thinking against the grain'. When activated on the part of a subject, this is the only way to resist the smooth seductions of, for example, advanced technology in the service of capitalism. Are there extant instances of such resistance of the social and economic status quo? If there are, it is my contention that such action presupposes at least a modicum of (critical) thinking on the part of the acting subjects (or groups) involved. After all, as will become evident, the action in question only makes sense against the backdrop of certain behaviour on the part of agencies of neoliberal capitalism.

6. From theory and thinking to action

An exemplary instance of action on the part of ordinary people – minus the aid of critical theory – is adduced by irrepressible investigative journalist Naomi Klein (2014). Klein uncovers the manifestation of a grass-roots democratic movement that can achieve what critical theory has failed to achieve (as Adorno and Horkheimer realised decades ago), namely, set an example of resistance to neoliberalism through concrete action. In the process it seems capable of changing the course of demonstrably capitalist-driven ecological degradation, arguably the most serious crisis facing humanity on Earth today. The evidence for this, affirmed by the International Panel on Climate Change (that is, the vast majority of climate scientists globally), is so readily available that it is redundant to list it yet again (see Kovel 2007; Foster et al. 2010; Olivier 2005). In her writing Klein fuses an indissoluble discursive link between democracy and ecological

concerns, but instead of getting bogged down in theory, she adduces specific instances of democratic action globally. So, for instance, after elaborating on graphic instances of resistance on the part of ordinary people to digging and drilling for oil or shale gas – subsumed under the globally applicable name of “Blockadia”, that is, “a roving transnational conflict zone” (Klein 2014: 254, 255) – she remarks:

Resistance to high-risk extreme extraction is building a global, grassroots, and broad-based network the likes of which the environmental movement has rarely seen. And perhaps this phenomenon shouldn't even be referred to as an environmental movement at all, since it is primarily driven by a desire for a deeper form of democracy, one that provides communities with real control over those resources that are most critical to collective survival—the health of the water, air, and soil. In the process, these place-based stands are stopping real climate crimes in progress.

By conspicuously linking democracy and ecological concerns, in the process driving home the inseparability of community-based action, collective survival, democratic control and environmental concerns, in the face of what she calls (another crucial conceptual revaluation) “climate crimes”, Klein foregrounds the indispensable role of action in the face of the behemoth of capitalism, driven and maintained by unscrupulous elites with no concern for the world that later generations will inherit. Earlier in the book she draws attention to the fact that climate change is a “great equaliser” (Klein 2014: 5-14) that affects everyone, from the poorest to the wealthiest. Yet, instead of the world's ‘leaders’ resolutely gathering in the face of the irrefutable evidence of probably catastrophic, anthropogenic climate change and forging a global, *democratic* programme to take the necessary (if for some financial elites unpalatable) economic steps to restrict global warming to two degrees Celsius, *nothing* concrete, in the form of *action*, has emerged from the climate conferences that have taken place, except, as she observes, talking and more talking. Typically at these meetings the representatives of the wealthy nations “stare at their shoes”, while those from poor countries desperately try to persuade them to take action in light of signs of the unfolding crisis. For example, because of global warming driven by the big carbon emitters (mainly the US and China), the glaciers on which comparatively poor Bolivians depend throughout the year for drinking water have melted to such a degree that they face a future of water scarcity. And yet, there is no respite in sight, in the form of action, to curb these emissions, as indicated by a recent study (McGrath 2017) that shows an increase of more than 50%, compared to previous years, in global carbon emissions during 2016. Such action would not

merely be economic or ecological in the sense of being motivated by economic and environmental concerns; it would be political in the most fundamental sense of serving the interests of the polity, of communities and societies globally.

It is interesting to note that, apart from hope-inspiring manifestations of democratic action, such as 'Blockadia', action that challenges the agencies of (neoliberal) empire today has, by and large, not come from the social or human scientists (including philosophers) who adhere to versions of critical theory, but from natural scientists (see in this regard Arendt 1998: 324) like James Hansen, regarded as the leading climatologist in the US (Foster et al. 2010: 11-12). Hansen has not hesitated to confront political authorities with the unpalatable news that the present economic activities of humanity worldwide, aided and abetted by governments, are driving a process that will probably make life on the planet's surface very difficult (if not impossible) in the future (see Hansen's testimony before the relevant US Senate committee; Hansen 2014). In fact, he engaged in political climate action by protesting about the fact that nothing was being done about the climate situation (something that must unavoidably have engendered 'thinking' on his part), and was duly arrested in front of the White House (Hansen 2012). To the best of my knowledge, there has not been any (reported) commensurate action on the part of human scientists, which may seem puzzling. Foster et al. (2010: 18-19) comment as follows in this regard:

...as natural scientists have become more concerned about the detrimental effects of the economic system on the environment, and correspondingly radicalized, asking more and more root questions, social scientists have increasingly turned to the existing economic system as the answer.

Why would this be the case? In a nutshell (Foster et al. 2010: 20), in addition to human (humanities and social) science research being burdened by the complicating fact that the social, or humanity, itself is its 'object' of investigation (so scientists have to consider that the value-system governing their own behaviour underpins, largely, what they investigate, too), such investigation "tends to be filtered through the dominant institutions and structures of the prevailing hierarchical social order" (2010: 20). According to Foster et al. the upshot is that, when social (human) scientists sometimes succeed in sidestepping the 'censorship' of hegemonic culture when expressing social or cultural criticism, it mostly concerns "marginal issues", and even when it involves crucial issues (such as Foucault's critique of practices of incarceration; 1995), its validity is denied, with the result that dominant economic and social practices are not threatened. To understand this, Foster and his co-authors invoke JD Bernal, 1950s

social scientist and critic, who claimed that the irrelevance of the social sciences (Foster et al. 2010: 21):

... could be attributed almost entirely to the fact that they were seriously circumscribed by and often directly subservient to the established order of power, and specifically to the dominant social/property relations...Despite important advances and revolutionary developments, social science in 'normal times' has been more about maintaining/managing a given social order than encouraging the historical changes necessary to human society, where social capacities and challenges keep evolving... Social science thus often enters a relatively dormant state once a new system of power is established. A new class-social order, once it surpasses its initial evolutionary stage and consolidates itself, demands nothing so much as 'the bad conscience and evil intent of apologetics' – since the main goal from then on is to maintain its position of power/hegemony.

Is it at all surprising, in the light of Bernal's merciless unmasking of social/human sciences that are, in the present era, beholden to 'the neoliberal powers that be', or Empire, that critical theory seems impotent when it comes to spurring people into action to challenge, and (preferably) depose the present world order in favour of one that can restore human and natural ecologies to a condition of integrity and 'health'? The unfortunate fact is that, even where it lights up a theorist's mind with a spark of critical intent, ('thinking', as specified earlier), theory (critical or otherwise) cannot guarantee such action, although it *can* and does play an important *preparatory* role in relation to it. That is, together with thinking it can only *prepare one for action*, something one can learn by analogy from psychoanalysis.

7. Psychoanalysis as preparation for action

Psychoanalysis addresses the relationship between the subject and (dominant, pathologising) power insofar as it fills the 'gaps' in the subject's personal narrative as these are registered in her or his symptomatic 'parapraxes' (telling negations, evasions, slips of the tongue, and so on). These are significant because they are the symptoms of repressed materials, themselves inextricably linked to regimes of power in extant society, which, in turn, are accompanied by certain prohibitions such as those pertaining to sexuality in Victorian society, or (on the other hand) either obsessive obedience to, or refusal to conform to, consumerist expectations or compliance in contemporary society. The point is that psychoanalysis is potentially emancipatory insofar as it enables the subject to reconfigure his

or her relationship with the source of pathological symptoms of unconscious repression, that is, the hegemonic powers of the time. Accordingly, in respect of psychoanalysis Ian Parker has argued in his book, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis – Revolutions in Subjectivity* (2011), that a ‘revolution’ in subjectivity can occur in the clinic, but there is no direct connection between this and a social revolution outside the clinic. Just as the former can only prepare the individual subject for the latter by clarifying their relationship with power (today, with neoliberalism), so, too, theory can, at best, prepare one for critical, emancipatory action against the Leviathan of neoliberal capitalism. Parker (2011: 196) argues as follows about this process:

The personal is already political, but the clinic can only operate as a place to unravel the ideological constitution of the individual subject if we insist on a radical *disjunction* between this site and the world. It is precisely because psychoanalysis breaks from everyday conversational procedures – because it refuses the ‘relational’ dimension of interaction and the attempt to forge an intersubjective space between speakers – that the analyst is able to provoke a questioning of what power is for the subject.

And, shifting focus to the locus of power and the individual subject’s potentially reconfigured relationship with it, through her or his psychoanalytically-mediated questioning of dominant power, he continues (Parker 2011: 198-199):

Lacanian clinical psychoanalysis does not solve the riddle of whether the spirit of revolt can take the place of the revolt of spirit against capitalism today. However, Lacanian work can be taken forward in order to reflect on its own practice and on the limits to what it can claim to do. Theoretical advance in its therapeutic practice is predicated on a theory of revolution that occurs outside the clinic, even if the paradoxical point of connection is a point at which we learn about the necessary disjunction between the two spheres of action. The kind of revolution in subjectivity that occurs inside the clinic makes of the clinic a quite specific site of refusal – one that is estimate [simultaneously intimately internal *and* externally applicable; BO], implicated in the social at the moment it refuses it – but even then it is the site of refusal of the very capitalist world that made it possible. It gives birth to glimmering, fading, and glimmering again of a subject open to change, to subjectivity in revolution.

It is striking that Parker refers to “the two spheres of action” (regarding the individual subject) – those inside and outside the clinic, respectively – and that

they are inseparably connected through mutual implication. I want to argue that the relationship between (critical) theory and action is structurally analogous to the relationship between subjects' potential reconfiguration of their relationship with power, on the one hand, and the possible revolutionary social action that this *may* give rise to, but is not guaranteed to (see Olivier 2016, for an exploration of this theme regarding literature).

Kristeva's notion of 'revolt' marks another such paradigmatic moment of action, although, strictly speaking, it seems to me to be on a par with what Parker characterises as a preparatory stage on the way to (possible, not certain) action, if one considers that Kristeva principally conceives of it as an event 'internal' to the subject. She points out that (2000: 7):

Happiness exists only at the price of a revolt. None of us has pleasure without confronting an obstacle, prohibition, authority, or law that allows us to realize ourselves as autonomous and free. The revolt revealed to accompany the private experience of happiness is an integral part of the pleasure principle. Furthermore, on the social level, the normalizing order is far from perfect and fails to support the excluded: jobless youth, the poor in the projects, the homeless, the unemployed, and foreigners, among many others. When the excluded have no culture of revolt and must content themselves with ideologies, with shows and entertainments that far from satisfy the demand for pleasure, they become rioters.

Realising ourselves "as autonomous and free" clearly entails a moment of action, designated by Kristeva as 'revolt', which she characterises by arguing (Kristeva 2002: 100) that there is an etymological connection between 'revolt' and the Sanskrit root, meaning 'open, discover', as well as (Kristeva 2000: 1) the related Latin and Old French words for 'turn', 'return', 'vault' and 'roll'. About 'revolt' (2002: 85) she observes, "I emphasize its potential for making gaps, rupturing, renewing", and claims that it is *necessary* to revolt, without which European culture, with its "tradition of revolt" would not have displayed great leaps in rejuvenating or innovative activity. In this way she suggests that there is a parallel between such 'cultural' revolt and the indispensable 'revolutions' in a 'healthy' individual's life (referred to earlier). It is important not to make the mistake of associating 'revolt' in this sense of 'creative transformation' (Kristeva 2002: 104), exclusively with *political* revolution in the conventional historical sense, however. She (2002: 102) cautions against this, considering that political revolutions like the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution had no sooner abolished old values in favour of new ones, than it forgot to *question* these new values, with the result that both degenerated into tyranny and dictatorship, in

this way 'betraying revolt'. For her, therefore, revolt has to be a 'permanent' or recurrent feature of individual *and* social life (Kristeva 2002: 103), lest these also degenerate into the smug conventional attitudes and uncritical practices born of a misguided assumption that 'the revolution' has occurred once and for all. Considering that in neoliberal consumer society the term 'revolution' is sometimes used to indicate what recommends the latest consumer product (Kristeva 2002: 104), it is not hard to grasp the degree of torpidity informing the (in-) capacity to 'revolt' (by *acting*) against what has become sclerotic modes of social, economic and political behaviour, themselves continually reinforced by neoliberal practices. But how does one get from the individual to the collective social level?

8. From the individual subject to trans-individuation and the collective

In light of Kristeva's insistence, that 'revolt' should not be restricted to the individual subject, perhaps I should introduce a much-needed moment of inter- or trans-subjectivity here, lest the impression be created by the above, that one can never rise above the individual subject's 'interpellation' (to use an Althusserian term, usually reserved for the moment one is constituted as the subject of ideology, in a novel manner) as a 'subject capable of acting critically' against neoliberalism. For this I turn to the Nietzsche of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1984), particularly one passage, which I believe provides important textual evidence that it is possible for an individual intent on acting to have an 'audience' (that is, a group of like-minded, or at least receptive, individuals). The passage in question comes from Part III (1984; 'The convalescent', 2), where a conversation between Zarathustra and his animals takes place. In the course of this conversation his 'animals' (the eagle and the serpent) say to him (1984: 332): 'For your animals know well, O Zarathustra, who you are and must become: behold, *you are the teacher of the eternal recurrence* [the doctrine that, in ethical terms, requires one to act 'for all eternity' as one has chosen to act ethically when once required to do so; see Olivier 2007] – that is your destiny!' Here, as in the other words that they address to Zarathustra in this section, the animals act as an audience or constituency for Zarathustra, showing that, of all the living beings addressed by him in the narrative, they are the only ones who may truly be said to have understood what he teaches.

This may seem trivial to some – what are animals, compared to humans, as far as comprising an audience, collective or 'public' is concerned, may be the objection – but if one keeps in mind that all the figures invented by Nietzsche in this text have interrelated symbolic meanings and significance, it

is not inconsequential that his *animals* have understood him (even if, judging by Zarathustra's responses to them in this section, they may be seen as 'echoing' him to a certain degree), in this way confirming his distinctive cultural (prophetic, educational) function. After all, if Zarathustra is at pains to bring humans the news that they must learn to love the earth, because 'God is dead', it is hardly surprising that those beings that are close to the earth, without any religious or metaphysical illusions – animals – are the ones who 'show understanding' in this narrative, in contrast to the different people he addresses (including the 'higher men', who show glimpses of understanding from time to time, but then regress in this respect).

I would suggest, then, that his listening, talking 'animals' may be read as metaphorically representing receptive *human* beings who are attuned to the message that Nietzsche is bringing via the figure of Zarathustra. By using the figure of 'animals' Nietzsche intimates that an important prerequisite for 'understanding' him is to remember that humans are animals of a certain type, who have largely forgotten that they are such, and therefore tend to neglect or disregard those attributes ('instincts', drives, and so on) which they share with 'real' animals, and which connect them with the earth. Beings such as 'real' animals have no choice in the matter; they live instinctively in accordance with the Dionysian cycle of birth, growth, decay and resurrection (of the species). The important point that this section illustrates, I believe, is that Nietzsche is not completely sceptical (or pessimistic) – as he sometimes does appear to be – about the prospects of having an 'audience' or public that would confirm his creative, inventive contribution to philosophy, and therefore to culture. Moreover, the very fact that Nietzsche *wrote* in an extant language, and went to undeniable lengths to have his writings published, is a performative confirmation of his desire for, and implicit belief in the possibility of, an audience, readership or interpretive community.

What I hope to have demonstrated with this invocation of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, is that, even if the psychoanalytic reconfiguration of one's relationship with hegemonic power, or one's readiness to 'revolt', inescapably has its genesis in individual subjectivity, there is no 'law' that restricts it to this solitary subjectivity; like Nietzsche's (Zarathustra's) receptive animals, one is bound to find other individuals receptive to one's changed perspective on (neoliberal) power. What Stiegler (2015: location 5467) calls a "process of transindividuation" in an excerpt, above, can, and sometimes does, happen between human beings because of the 'gift' of intersubjectivity. Hence, although individual courage is required to act, and although the process emerges from the subject's re-thinking and reconfiguration of her or his relationship with the dominant power of their social present, it need not be confined to individual parameters. As Nietzsche's

text shows, we all have to find our receptive 'animals', that is, other people who value the earth above the interests of neoliberalism.

9. Conclusion

What one can learn from psychoanalysis (as well as, *mutatis mutandis*, from [critical] 'thinking', keeping in mind Hardt and Negri's criticism, that it cannot stand alone, but has to be followed by critical *action*), namely that via psychoanalytic questioning the subject is able to reposition herself or himself *vis-à-vis* the alienating forces in the extant world (Parker 2011), can therefore be transferred to critical theory. Just as psychoanalysis (and critical thinking) prepares the subject in the clinic for possible (not necessary or guaranteed) action in social reality, so, too, can critical theory *at best* prepare the subject for action in socio-political reality by stressing – as the theorists I have enlisted to demonstrate this do in different ways – the difference between theory and *action*, between reason (thinking) and *practice*. The latter member(s) of these two dyads cannot be assumed to flow automatically from their theoretical counterparts.

To conclude, therefore – in anticipation of questions and charges to the effect that, what I have argued here amounts to no more than more theorising, *minus* action – allow me to adduce the following two instances of action that followed 'preparation' by theory. During the 'merger' between three South African institutions – two universities (one a provincial campus of a nationwide institution) and one technikon – in the early 2000s, B, a philosophy professor at one of the universities, sent a letter to all his colleagues on the university senate, urging them not to vote for the temporary incumbent of the position of Vice-Chancellor, who happened to be someone who had served the apartheid government at the highest level in its department of higher education, on pain of possibly losing his position. He was duly summoned by the temporary incumbent to explain himself, which he did candidly, and subsequently did not lose his job (much to his surprise). He was motivated in this by the Lacanian dictum (Copjec 2002: 17-19), that the so-called revolutionary's choice – 'freedom or death' – represents a win/win situation, unlike the 'mugger's choice' – 'your money or your life' – where one faces a win/lose situation, for obvious reasons. How so? Because, should the revolutionary prevail, she or he gains freedom, as they also do in the event of her or his death. This may seem counter-intuitive, but consider: they would die free subjects instead of living as subjugated ones. Such death need not be literal, of course; if the professor in question had been dismissed from his post, it would have been a kind of metaphorical death, but his freedom would have been intact. His actions were precipitated by his familiarity with Lacan's theory of the subject, which prepared him for the decisive moment of choice

– his decision to act, and of course, the action itself. But the theory in question could not, and can never, guarantee or automatically, with algorithmic certainty, ‘trigger’ action.

The second instance involves something similar, again concerning an academic who, when faced with the summary termination of the services of a colleague by the university where they both worked (on a trumped-up charge of ‘gross insubordination’ – apparently a favourite ‘reason’ to adduce when authorities wish to get rid of you in South Africa, because it takes so little real evidence, and so much in the form of ‘personal impression’), decided to provide evidence at the appeals hearing she was entitled to. His evidence consisted in a discourse-analysis, in terms of the principle, that the ‘unsaid’ is just as, if not more, important than the ‘said’, of the document on which her dismissal was based, demonstrating that what was omitted in the document was crucial to exonerating the employee in question from the charge brought against her. She was duly reinstated with full benefits at the university, but he suffered the consequences of his actions, when his post-retirement contract was not renewed upon its expiry. The lesson? Don’t expect that action, regardless of its ethical or political urgency, will have exclusively beneficial consequences, if any; more often than not, those in positions of power will have their revenge, but that is no reason *not* to act.

We live at a time when action is required on a large civil scale to put an end to, if not reverse, the demonstrably deleterious consequences of the decades-long rule of neoliberalism globally. This does not merely concern the shrinking of civil liberties (Hardt and Negri 2009: viii) worldwide, as ‘the common’ is relentlessly colonised for private profit, but even more urgently, it pertains to the egregious, rapidly approaching irreversible, damage inflicted on the planetary ecology through global warming and (related to this, and to excessive pollution as well as acidification of our oceans) species extinction. These are only some of the effects of rampant, unrestrained economic growth which, like a cancer, is encroaching on all the conditions enabling life on Earth. To curb this, critical *theory* has to make way for critical *action* on a large, collective scale. But this begins with the individual, even if – as argued previously with reference to Nietzsche – one has to avail oneself of the intersubjective opportunities for trans-individuation, for the sake of reaching a collective.*

*The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation of South Africa, and of the University of the Free State, which has contributed towards making research for this paper possible, is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

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