

“The Thirties Are Still Before Us”: Logical Analysis of the Concrete Situation

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“The Thirties”: here this term has nothing to do with ragtime, long-nosed Bugattis, or Maurice Chevalier. The expression instead designates the period in Europe in which three types of power (one to the East, the other to the South, the third in the middle) emerged that, despite numerous and important differences, have one thing in common: the claim to destroy the economic, political and spiritual order by which Europe (but also America) recognized itself and replace it with a “new order.” It is necessary, truthfully speaking, that we agree to extend what we call “the Thirties” a bit and have them begin in 1926, the date Mussolini sends Gramsci to prison—the most eloquent sign, no doubt, of the Fascist consolidation of power in Italy. The consolidation of National Socialist power in Germany is accomplished, as is well known, in 1934, when Hitler definitively does away with a Weimar Republic that by then had for quite some time been no more than a stage prop, and a shabby one at that. In the meantime, Stalin manages for his part to decimate the Leninist old guard, remove Trotsky, Zinoviev and Bukharin, and install the steel age of bureaucratic anonymity under the most accurate of pseudonyms.

Barely eight years, and it is done. The first lesson to be drawn from this frightening period is that the toppling of the liberal democratic system—even if it was already brewing for some time, and along multiple paths—was carried out with a suddenness that caught the old world unaware. The sociopolitical systems founded on the modern concept of the Law (and well before the French Revolution, since it’s on your shores¹ that the Contract’s formula—I am tempted to say its prayer—was first recited, by the mouth of the Mayflower’s immigrants: “[we] do by these presents solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God and one another, Covenant and Combine ourselves into a Civic Body Politic”), systems that are also masters of science and production and

therefore masters of the World, were not only incapable of doing anything against the rise to power of Fascist henchmen, Nazi commandos and Stalinist bureaucrats, they *understood* nothing about the nature of these new historical monsters or the populist groundswell which bore them. This is really the main reason I think it necessary, or even urgent, to develop some analyses allowing us to avoid a similar incomprehension and powerlessness with regard to *our own future*. I know all too well that such an undertaking requires that the problem of method be posed in order to avoid the traps of historical comparison, the vanity of “projections,” and the turgidity of “prophecy.” I will come to this. But first allow me to assess, through some brief examples, the extent of the blindness our fathers demonstrated the entire decade of the Thirties: this just might inspire *us* with an astonishment, and even a scare, that would be completely salutary.

1.

Léon Blum, in an article published on August 3, 1932 in the newspaper *Le Populaire*, commented on the German elections of July 31st, in which the NSDAP seemed to experience a setback in favor of the classical right. He wrote:

von Papen and Schleicher incarnate the old Germany . . . the imperial, feudal, patronal, pietist Germany, with its massive sense of discipline, its collective pride, its conception of civilization that is at the same time scientific and religious. Hitler, to the contrary . . . here the definitions are more difficult, but we can however say that he symbolizes a spirit of change, of renewal, of revolution. In the crucible of Hitlerian racism we find, next to certain national traditions of the old Germany, all the contradictory instincts, all the anxieties, all the miseries and all the revolts of the new Germany confusedly boiling . . . Will I admit it? If I put myself on the plane of becoming, von Schleicher’s victory would appear all the more disappointing and disheartening than Hitler’s.

It will be said that this hesitant rhetoric, threading clichés like pearls so as to better demonstrate its historical blindness, is all one could have expected, already in the Thirties, from a socialist politician. It will also be noted that in 1932 the characteristics of Hitlerism had not yet all emerged, or were at the very least difficult to decipher, above all for a foreigner. But what can one say to minimize the oversight committed, as late as 1936, by two of the greatest minds of the infra-war generation, namely Georges Bataille and André Breton (yes Georges Bataille and André Breton: it has to be repeated to be believed), who approved of the German army’s reoccupation of the Rhineland in the following terms:

“As for us, we at least are for a totally united world—one having nothing in common with the present police coalition against a public enemy number one. We are against the scraps of paper, the slave’s prose of the chancelleries. We think texts drafted around the conference table bind men only over their dead bodies. To them we prefer, *no matter what*, Hitler’s antidiplomatic brutality, which is in fact more peaceful than the frothy excitement of the diplomats and politicians.”²

2.

You might already think it would be best to stop these citations and more generally the testimonies to the incomprehension (not to mention the counter-interpretation) national socialism was subject to at the time. After all, you will say, we’ve learned our lesson. Not only the lesson given by facts sufficiently showing the Hitlerian movement’s “revolutionary” character was merely a mask, but the lesson offered by the historico-political analysis and philosophical reflection of the time as well. Didn’t a certain Franz Neumann (starting in 1942 right here in New York) inaugurate, under the sign of the *Behemoth*, a critique of the explanations then offered and begin to assemble the traits of a sort of logic of Chaos?³ Don’t we find sketched in Simone Weil’s texts, with a lucidity whose precociousness is all the more confounding (since they date, for the most part, from the period of 1927-1934), an indissociably conceptual and historical interrogation of the *deepest roots* of Fascist and National Socialist populism, understood as the social and political repercussion of the rise to power of two totally novel phenomena: the acephalic technicization of production (including scientific work) and the bureaucratic organization it engenders? Simone Weil’s most important text on these matters—*Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne?* [Are we heading for proletarian revolution?]⁴—even shows that these completely novel means of analysis can also account for the Bolshevik reality during the consolidation of Stalinism. It is the first text to demonstrate that (and explain why) the so-called “Worker’s State” is in no way proletarian. Not only is it too devoted to a production governed by modern technology, but it does so under a form that is only just emerging under Fascism: namely, the unification of the industrial, union, and State bureaucracies in the hands of the leader. From August 1933 on, the “Marxist” accounts of the Bolshevik system are outflanked by the French philosopher: not only the accounts it gives of itself, but the Trotskyite critique as well. If one combines Weil’s analyses with those that Gramsci undertook in prison at the same time—those on the political plane (the polemic with Bordiga on the unions

and soviets) as well as those on the philosophical plane (critique of Bukharin), with its denunciation of the metaphysical and therefore “idealist” character of a supposed “dialectical materialism” as well as the degeneration of the Marxist thought of History into sociologizing—the conclusion will be that the blindness of the Thirties was not as total as I said it was. It will be reassuring, in any case, to consider that today *we* possess enough experience and intellectual tools to *understand*, from now on, these monstrous political formations that once shook our world. What’s more, we know enough about them to be grounded in our belief that if the development of this same world—having taken on forms unforeseeable fifty or sixty years ago—neither shelters it from various “jolts” nor spares it from great efforts of adaptation and evolution, it at the very least removes from our heads the great phantasm that precisely characterizes the Thirties (see the literally obsessive titles and themes of Edmund Husserl): that of the Crisis, in the singular and with the capital letter that the always suspect thought of the “end” requires.

The most recent epoch can pride itself on its renewal of a moral sense, its unhoped-for solidarity concerning the principle of law in international relations, and even on the vigorous return of religious spiritualism. Aren’t we witnessing, on the specifically moral plane, an evolution or even a stupefying about-face, in Europe as much in the US, of that part of the population that during the time of the Vietnam War seemed to push critique to the point of dissidence, i.e. the students, then nourished on Bob Dylan and Jerry Rubin? Isn’t it this same student caste that, for at least the past fifteen years, has had nothing in its head other than its own professional education? Or, if the generosity inherent to its age still happens, despite everything, to manifest itself, doesn’t it only manage to find expression in the most traditional moral universality (the rights of man), as if the philosophical and political consciousness of this entity had never been (and should never have been) put into question? As for this entity one calls the rule of law, it was so roundly scoffed at in the thirties—from the conquest of Abyssinia by the Duce to the annexation of Austria and the Sudatenland by the Führer—that its discredit brought down the League of Nations; but is it not precisely in the organization succeeding the latter in our own day, the United Nations, that it is resuscitated with a vigor formerly only hoped for, so much so that in the Gulf crisis, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or the reorganization of Eastern Europe, all nations were assembled beneath the banner of international law? And finally, or rather first of all (the majority of people, at least, think so), isn’t Christianity itself in the process of winning its long struggle—at the same time *against* and *in* the modern world—and

of inventing, implanting, and even imposing little by little (but of course through “legitimate procedures” that are respectful of human freedom, as it every day proclaims) a new temporal kingdom of Christian spirituality—or, calling it by its name, a new Christianity?

In this way, it seems decisively concluded that the Thirties were a mere accident in the course of the modern world, with the latter defined by a liberal economic system (whatever its “social” variants) and democratic political institutions. This seems conclusive less through the victory won in 1945 against the totalitarian regimes of the Axis powers than through the irresistible absorption of yesterday’s enemies into the play of worldwide production, itself supposing (and therefore effectively bringing along in its wake) a growing proportion of institutional liberties and juridical guarantees. Doesn’t the recent collapse of the post-Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe add the finishing touch to this process? The title I’ve chosen therefore claims only in vain to put “before us” what is in truth behind us; it feigns not to know that our world no longer has to worry with confronting any radical “challenge”: it is confronted only with essentially limited, surmountable difficulties no longer threatening to disturb its logic. Bearing on its forehead not the “number of the Beast” (as the repressed Rabbi, anti-Prussian Rhinelander and impenitent Aristotelian named Karl Marx believed) but the monogram interweaving freedom and development, the West would therefore have *before it* no unknown other than the already familiar figures its own extension will assume.

It is this serene confidence that I would like, despite everything, to disturb.

Doing this with any credibility first requires, as I mentioned a moment ago, that one avoid the methodological traps of historical comparison. It is also necessary to confess that my chosen title runs the risk of having its deliberate provocation misinterpreted. Truth be told, the “provocation” is so manifestly deliberate that I didn’t seriously think the risk was that great. There is no question of saying that Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism, such as they were in history, only seem to have disappeared, but in reality wait, behind the door of the future, in order to sneak up behind us. No question then of a “return of the real”—an always inappropriate imagination when the task is to think history, and doubly so when the historical dimension interrogated is the future. The future in fact has no face or figure. Moreover, the interrogation bearing upon it should never be understood as some attempt to divine “what might happen to us” (a genre to which irrational projections, or those that like to think themselves rational, belong just as much as so many manners of “wishful thinking”⁵). But

what can a question bear upon if it has no real before it—not even a *possible real*, that metaphysical chimera *par excellence*?

The answer is to be found in another signification of “possibility”: the one in which, as Heidegger reminds us, *possibilitas* means the same thing as *essentia*. Our questions will therefore be oriented toward the essence of modernity—that is, on the first (and only) system of all the systems of idealities appearing in history in which the very sense of ideality is given with the concept of infinity. All of Antiquity (if one concedes that Rome, beyond the closed particularities of its own civilization, had in fact no forms of thinking-the-world, no modes of comprehending being and the true other than those received from Greece)—all of Antiquity is in fact dominated by what Aristotle expressed in this axiom: ἄπειρον οὐκ ἀρχή: “It is not the infinite that commands.” This signifies that the idealities of Greek science are compelled to observe a double limit: that of logical materiality (which limits every form to the specificity of a matter, and the most englobing forms to the homonymy of the categories, final matters of being) and that of language (thought, even in seeking out its first principles, finds itself restricted to the dialectical usage of a language). The infinite is also incapable of commanding the ethical—i.e. political—idealities of ancient Greece. All the less so to the extent that the proper object of the πόλις (and this is what decisively elevates it above the “domestic” and “basilic” modalities of being-in-common) is not simply, as both Aristotle and Plato agreed, the *public use* of language to seek out means of discriminating between true and false, good and evil, the useful and the harmful (this is only where *our* “political” existence stops, insofar as its foundation is found in the “parliament”), but indeed the *logical (onto-logical) orientation* of this use: this makes the political modality of existence a species of its philosophical modality. This is why the Greeks did not conceive the political task’s threefold discrimination the way the moderns without fail define it, in each of its directions: for the first, through a *method* allowing for the reduction of every real to its “objectivity,” i.e. to a certain number of univocal statements in which representation can always grasp its own act again; for the second, through an *intention* whereby the moral subject can recognize, apart from the materiality of its motivations, the only Law valid for him in heaven and on earth: the universality of its own form; finally, for the third, through a calculus of pleasures whose principle is the fulfillment of all the natural virtualities of man in the individual and collective production of himself through work. What I have called the *infinity* of these three circles of idealities is not hard to locate: it is found in the fact that their movement each time opens itself and closes on the presence to self of the *egological sub-*

jectum as Descartes first become conscious of it, or such as he invented it.

We are already getting near our goal (which, as you've no doubt noticed, is to try to understand, from the perspective of this historical determination of modernity, both the "monstrous" phenomena of the Thirties and various "troubling" phenomena that our present, in its radiant course, comes across as if they were simple "bumps," so as to see these phenomena *as precursive signs of modernity's exhaustion*) if we remark that Descartes precisely underlined—more than once—that he was conscious of speaking not of "what is" but only of "what can be most easily represented," thereby replacing the elucidation of the nature of things with a methodically elaborated and knowingly fictive tale, a "*fable* of the World." His Latin itself (the mother tongue, as is well known, of his thought) would not let him forget that the determination—starting from a method whose true name is *Ars*—of the "facile," i.e., of the *facile* (the "doable"), while it inaugurates the becoming "engineer" of *ingenium* (only Vico seems to have understood this), also moves thought into a universe of *artifacts* and transforms knowledge into an infinite enterprise of *theoretical simulation*. The question as to what right one has to raise the objects of such a simulation to the rank of being remains, despite everything, a question for Descartes: a question which, though it hardly exerts much pressure (it is in fact called "quite light, and so to speak metaphysical"), demands a response. Descartes' response is itself extremely casual—it is not certain whether we should see in it the manner of a gentleman (casting doubts to the same water he threatened to throw the sailors complaining about him—at sword-point) or the baroque habit of considering the world a simple theater, where only "machine pieces" play. Save that, through an inversion of the *Deus ex machina* so common in modern philosophy, these machines proceed from God. But the stakes are still the same: the production of a reality-effect in representation, an effect itself purely represented. For appealing to "divine veracity" and imagining that "the world is a dream" amounts to the same thing. But are *we*, *today*, truly capable of still according the same confidence in a figure of the possible that confirms an artifice with a dream, and whose sole effective "proof" is the energetic and mute perpetuation of its own activity? Or do the diverse crackings in our most recent history open our ear anew to the Greek truth that we are commanded by a limitation and that—under the penalty of madness, interminable wandering and incoercible crime—our existence is possible only insofar as it is ordered by and to this command: which first commands that we seek the conditions for its being heard, and for its formulation?

3.

It is now a question of *determining* what was just named in purely descriptive—or even impressionistic—terms as “crackings” (still muffled but increasingly audible crackings in the structures of our modern world). This determination’s *principle* must be drawn from the hypothesis of an exhaustion of the modern ‘possible’, conceived of as the logic of infinity. The secondary hypothesis (which, it is hoped, is not a simple Ptolemean epicycle) is that the first manifestation of a disturbance in this system of infinite idealities is found in the Fascist, National-Socialist, and Stalinist ruptures, such that their occurrence made certain characteristics of this very possibility’s catastrophe appear. From here, it is not absurd to suppose that a comparison of these characteristics with certain “troubling” (not to mention patent) phenomena of our present societies can help us decipher what is, however, not at all given with these phenomena: their sense at the heart of a system uniting them all, thereby placing each in its true light. Such a comparison requires we take into account the changes that have occurred, since the last world war, in the real forms assumed by these characteristics—changes due to the considerable evolution (both qualitative and quantitative) of modern productive bodies and, as a consequence, changes in the social realities and political mechanisms their functioning engenders. We should assume that the direct transposition into our epoch of configurations produced, by the first eruption of the World in the course of the thirties, along the edge of this or that fault-line, constitutes the rarest case: in all rigor, such a transposition would only be possible through a *dissimilitude* that would each time have to be defined. Most often, a great deal of conceptual sureness and descriptive finesse is required to recognize, in this or that contemporary phenomenon, the same internal impossibility of the possible—if I am permitted the audacity of this formulation—that in the past produced phenomena whose real appearance was quite different. On the other hand, what formerly seemed (and still seems, to contemporary convictions, to be the case) completely characteristic of the pre-war crises will have to be recognized as mere particularities having nothing to do with the historical figure here analyzed, and therefore as irrelevant for our future as well. In each and every case, thought experiences the solidity of the link between the necessity to give itself some “fore-sight” (*Vor-sicht*) into what it is trying to understand and the prudence (*Vorsicht*) of the analysis’ actual advance: the risk run by a comprehension projecting “ahead of itself” is the very reason for such prudence. You will have noticed that this situation of thought, that the genius of the German language has concentrated in a single word (whether it is heard as a

whole or the sense of each of its two components is revived with a dash), is the very same as what Heidegger called the “hermeneutic situation,” encircling every analysis in advance. And I have never dreamed of getting around it.

4.

If we concede (we will not, in fact, be able to re-demonstrate all of our question’s preliminaries) that the central determination of modern societies is that they constitute productive bodies, and that the central concept of every analysis of production is the concept of work, then our beginning is completely staked out: the character of modern work must be clarified starting out from what we have called *infinity*—the ontological characteristic imprinting its mark on all modern phenomena. This seems more difficult with regard to work than mathematics. The sense, in fact, in which modern mathematics constitutes itself within the horizon of a formal mastery of the infinite crops up, so to speak, right out in the open from the very debut of Modernity: with “the beginnings,”—once again taking up again Husserl’s rapid enumeration in §8 of the *Krisis*—“of algebra, of the mathematics of continua, of analytic geometry.”⁶ But it is necessary to remark that, even in the mathematical field, it is in no way easy to understand how the growing empire of formalizing abstraction (as the epistemologists put it) signifies the sometimes difficult—because traversed by delays only to be brusquely started up again by the mathematician’s imagination—progress of a single and same movement of in-finity in the sense in which we understand it, namely as a *growing ontological illimitation*. Descartes, when he solves the Pappus problem, no doubt liberates himself from the Aristotelian limitation to the two genres of “number” and “figure [shape]”—but he still stumbles against transcendent curves. All the elements of infinitesimal calculus are no doubt already present in Pascal’s *Traité des Sinus du Quart de Cercle*, but only upon Leibniz’s arrival in Paris does one discover in it “a glimmer the author didn’t see,” namely the formal implications of the characteristic triangle. Only with this are the intuitive roots analysis still sunk into the categories of quantity definitively uprooted. This never immediate—if not hidden—concept of infinity, which only manifests itself through the detours (not to say hazards) of a *history*, a history in which it little by little invades the practice of mathematicians without ever being simply available to them, should be recalled for this reason: to warn us that the illimitation of work as well is not to be piled up in the brute diversity of “facts” or in the “testimonies” of the actors in production. To the contrary, we must find an order than can be introduced into each, so that an historical

Gestalt might become manifest: that is, a totality *within which* the sense of its elements is suddenly decided. This sense is often different from what the elements seem to offer in isolation, and in any case always new with relation to it, since, even if the isolated sense comes to be confirmed, it is nevertheless for reasons or through relations we did not initially suspect.

We should therefore begin with the Idea. What is the Idea of modern work? This question does not mean: what are the modern ideas about work? These ideas are in fact innumerable, obtained by diverse methods, themselves formulated in heterogeneous languages stemming from theoretical or practical concerns deprived of any unity. This very diversity is the sign that what lacks in all our ideas about modern work is precisely its Idea. We are—and this is significant—content to speak of different “approaches” to the phenomenon: economic, sociological, ergonomic, psychological approaches, and let’s not forget the ethical . . . “*und, leider, auch Theologie* [and, worst of all, theology].”⁷ But how can the observations about work obtained in this fashion be knitted together? How can we first of all evaluate, for each of the partial objects constructed within each of these discourses, what reaches the essence of work or, to the contrary, misses it—and to what point, and why? This is what *shrinks back* out of the range of each *approach*, appearing all the less the moment one considers all of them together: here, the unity and sense of the thing itself seems, to the contrary, to “manifestly disappear.”

But this unity and sense of the thing itself can be grasped again, it seems to me, if we know how to distinguish between two ontological determinations—the first existential, the second categorial—of work, while at the same time showing how they criss-cross and indeed interpenetrate one another so as to form the essence of modern work.

Existentially, “work” designates the form of life in which existence is forced to expend itself to the sole profit of subsistence, βίος forced to exchange itself day in and day out for ζωή. Biography of the worker: he stayed alive. Categorially, “work” means fabrication, “poiesis” as “production.” At the heart of production the infraworldly being has a modality of being that is neither a “mathematical” form (the Untransformable itself, whereas work knows only what is transformed) nor a “physical” form (where the being appears as deploying itself of and by itself, whereas the characteristics of the “product” all proceed from a destination exterior to the product), nor even a “practical” form (under which a completed totality of logical relations, as with the practice of a language, far from arising from human action, to the contrary inflexibly and unconsciously precede and guide the latter). The “poietic” form is the fourth, distinct and autonomous with regard to the preceding

forms. The principle of infinity is at work in this form, as is easily noticed—this is outlined in advance through the very differences it maintains with regard to the three other determinations of possible modes of being of the infrawordly being. That the product can only receive *forms* resulting from a *transformation* supposes in fact that its matter is, in essence, indifferent, any matter “whatsoever.” Working amounts to dis-integrating matters and forms. Or rather, in pushing as far as possible the reduction of matter toward an *amorphous generality*: the very thing the French word “*matériau*”—material—silently expresses.⁸

But since matter and form are “dependent moments” of one another (in the sense Husserl’s third *Logical Investigation* gives this expression), the de-formation of matters presupposes these matters be reformed, in forms that in turn have been disintegrated from their own matters as much as possible. Working consists therefore in setting out on the path of “formalizing abstraction.” As a result, the essence of production must at least consist in a matter tending toward the material and a form tending toward the formula. It is not by chance that Jean-Touissant Desanti suspects mathematics to be a strange alliance—better: alloy—of the formal and the mineral, nor that he refers the activity of the mathematician neither to a “*mathesis*” (his epistemology will therefore be, to speak like Bachelard, non-Platonic and non-Cartesian, and consequently doubly non-Husserlian: significant restriction, but perhaps just as great a resource for a philosopher who nonetheless still speaks “Husserlian,” since he is thus obliged to invent a non-egological “descriptive” idiom) nor to a “*praxis*” (what the mathematician “does” is surrounded by no complete totality of the mathematical functioning as an unconscious, nourishing limit): he refers it to a *work* in the very sense we have begun to define.

There is, truthfully speaking, much more involved in modern mathematics than this. It is not only that it *is* a work (just as mathematical objects are products). More importantly, mathematics give birth to an ideal that is a lure, but which they nonetheless *appear* to tend toward realizing, through the repeated restitching of the wound that reopens, with each step, the finitude of their birth. It is the ideal of a *pure* product, one that “contains” the rule of its production, or the ideal of the *pure* object, totally object-ed in and through the pro-ject of its representation. Such an object would no longer object to anything through its matter, as if the latter had been reduced to the infinite plasticity of an absolute material and its formality, correlatively, stemmed entirely from a decree of formalization.

It is precisely mathematics—work of infinity or infinity of work—that, in solving to its own profit what has been called the “crisis of foun-

datations,” lays bare to the epistemologist (not just any of them, it’s true) *what was not expected*, the very thing the product was believed to be incapable of: offering itself as a phenomenon, belonging to a world, taking part in a language, and therefore being accessible only to a description. In sum: still bearing witness to a finitude. What is called—in a manner that confuses everything—the “triumph of the formalists over the logicians and intuitionists” no doubt indicates the capacity for the work of formalization to rest only on its own gesture. But this autarchy does not imply that mathematics, as rule governed game, would be a game “to be played,” in which calculating machines would, all by themselves, refine a material offering no opacity or resistance, producing a formality that would be a logic of nothing. Escaping such a shameful fate (one above all so manifestly contrary to the mathematician’s experience) would not however require mathematical work to be founded from without, either on the full exteriority of a formless “intuition” that would nevertheless “give” forms, or on the empty exteriority of a supposed “calculation,” supposedly “logical,” bearing on the supposed “forms” of a supposed “generality” of the proposition. These attempts at giving mathematics a philosophical foundation will have no purpose at all, save unknowingly putting the philosophical concept of foundation into crisis. All the more so to the extent that the demonstration by mathematics themselves of the autonomy of its own gesture does not signify a sort of self-foundation of mathematics *within* its own system. The inconsistency of the “perigraphic” ideal (as Aristotle put it), the ideal of a writing circularly returning into itself, so as to demonstrate its principle in one of its propositions, has been demonstrated in the theorems of limitation.

5.

From all that has just been said, three conclusions result:

1. The union of work and infinity—what from now on we will refer to with a single word: production—itself stems from an essential finitude of work, said to be “essential” because work is possible only where it lets itself be worked over by finitude.

2. An equally intrinsic sense of production is the bringing forth and gathering together not of the forms of finitude *as such*, but to the contrary only those forms of finitude in which finitude *also* inaugurates its own extinction in infinity. Each and every matter, from the moment it is manifested as the matter it is, is exposed to the possibility of being reduced to a material. No form, in turn, appears without opening the path to formalization. The most closed use can be grasped in its logic

only by offering itself up to translation in a system of abstract equivalents.

3. The catastrophe of production (the exhaustion of its possible) is not the result of these infinite idealities being struck with an ontological malediction—such beliefs are at the origin of every reactionary attitude, whether in theory or in practice. It is due rather to the fact that one gives in to the lure (which is, it is true, these idealities' *own* dazzling reflection) of imagining they harbor the possibility of *really completing* their movement in and as an absolute totality: in other words, a "world." For this "real possibility" (itself purely imaginary) is precisely what forbids their *possibilitas*. Whatever is no longer commanded, not by a limit, but by an illimitation, not only does not have its commencement in itself, but can no longer receive itself into itself either. The conjunction of a second Aristotelian axiom, πέρασ γὰρ τέλος ("completion is a limit") with the one we started with—ἄπειρον οὐκ ἀρχή—implies that all infinite idealities are equally a-telic. If, then, everything in the world is offered up to the hold of infinity, the latter in turn cannot reduce "with no remainder" any mode of being of infraworldly beings to the objectivity of the product. Infinity can no more "close" around the world that it can constitute itself as a substitute world.

6.

But the temptation of a sort of ontological lift-off, outside the attraction of finitude, is the very soul of the modern world: this is what gives it its "Faustian" allure. This temptation does not appear, however, simply because modern idealities are idealities of infinity: *beyond* this they also suppose the lure of their totalization. How then does such a lure take shape? Continuing to thread the metaphor of lift-off, I would say that it is through the extrapolation of a kind of logical acceleration resulting from the application of the work of infinity *to itself*. For it is the essence of infinity that such an application be indefinitely possible. We can even attribute the progressive elaboration of modern mathematics by Cavalieri, Fermat, Pascal, and finally Newton and Leibniz to this very application. The ontological sense of modern mathematics is, in fact, that of an acceleration of mathematical infinity through the mathematization of the infinite. But this is where the *rational lure*, proper to all infinite idealities, originates: the lure that their sense inhabits them as if it was also their motor. In other words, as if their *real* history was "in truth" only the manifestation of their *actual* infinity.

The lure therefore consists in confusing the *operatory* regime of the logic of the infinite—within which, as Leibniz the *mathematician* said,

finitum interventu infiniti determinatur, this “intervention” having in principle no assignable limit—with its *metaphysical* regime, i.e., with the fiction of a substantiality of the infinite, pouring itself out in a regulated manifestation (in a “glory” whose rays *would be* calculated, as Leibniz said, this time as *onto-theo-logician*), in a pure auto-production whose ‘real’ *would be* “well founded” appearance. It is precisely to the extent that modern Reason is incapable of separating its operation from its phantasm that what Dominique Janicaud calls the “powers of the rational”⁹ (which are certainly not the powers of Darkness, since one of their other names is “the Enlightenment”) change into a pure and simple *power* casting a measureless night of enslavement over the entirety of finitude. We might not like hearing we are enslaved—and even infinitely enslaved—by the very becoming of our freedom, but this is shocking only for those who have not perceived what constitutes the essence of this freedom. Our freedom is not a freedom of free deployment, nor one of innocence or abandon: it is a freedom of *mastery*, something it has not stopped affirming since its first formulation. But mastery finds nothing more difficult than remembering that it too takes part in what makes up the common lot of all human gestures: the blessed opacity of their principle (I say “blessed” because it has as its own principle the fertile shadow of mortality, where we are plunged by the divine to keep us from attaining it).

It won’t be hard to grasp that the change of these powers into pure power, powers dazzled by the imaginary of totalization, foretells inevitable “crackings” in the system it dominates—in other words, it readies all revolts. But it still must not be forgotten (at the price of falling into moral illusion) that such revolts, although directed against the consequences of the lure, nonetheless evolve within the lure itself, whose ambiguity they must share *to the precise extent they have not arrived at its principle*.

“Enslavement” and “Revolt” are still premature allusions to our question, whose historico-political character and quite precise temporal determination I am not forgetting. They are premature to the extent that they might have one believe that the history of reason is sufficient to account—to give reason—for history itself; they would have one believe I’m moving toward a neo-Hegelianism, outfitted with some epistemological tools on the one hand, a few analytical means of the Heideggerian style on the other. But nothing of the sort is at issue here, even if it is conceded that the infinity of the subject is in fact one of the foci of the modern world. If I immediately add that the second focus of this world is found in the infinity of Work-Wealth, I am in no way implying that economic production is the sole motor of modern reality,

including its system of idealities. No more Marxist, therefore, than idealist. No mixture of the two, either.

What then is at issue, and what paths must we take in order to construct a response to the initial question? Schematically, let's say that we will be guided by the formal homology existing between what has just been called the two "foci" of modernity. This no doubt supposes something that is in fact in Marx, and Marx alone. I would like to speak of the analysis of the characteristics absolutely proper to work and wealth the moment they are united in what I call "Work-Wealth," like two heads of a single hydra. If "work" designates the non-free form of poiesis, it not does begin with the modern world. It is a non-free form in terms of its 1) finality: providing for material life and it alone; 2) in terms of its relation to beings: treating them like materials, with no regard for their essential forms, and 3) in terms of its social determination, whereby the product of work (save what is necessary for the subsistence—and not the existence—of the worker) is in the hands of the master. All these traits are no doubt already present in the work of the slave of antiquity as well as the medieval serf. We are obliged to recall these trivialities because nothing to this point supposes an *intrinsic* relation between the infinity of work and the infinity of wealth. The slave serves to nourish a free Greek citizen, and if, as Plato never stopped recalling, wealth threatens civic freedom, it originates neither in the work of slaves nor the artisanal division of labor. It stems from foreign trade or commerce and is exorcised only insofar as the City maintains such commerce as "foreign" and therefore "outside": if not outside its walls, at least foreign to its moral and political principle. The feudal lord, in the same way, receives his splendor and enough to maintain his arms from the work he levies, but he knows no form of wealth other than what is spent or consumed in use—that is, he knows nothing of Work-Wealth. What's more, the principle of infinity proper to the general equivalent (let's speak of it more banally: money) is not yet conjoined, in either the Greek or Christian world, to work's own principle of infinity. Both worlds lack the means necessary to initiate the acceleration of the respective infinities into a reciprocal, common and in truth novel infinitization whose apparently benign name is "commercial production."

As is well known, it has taken almost five centuries for this phenomenon (commercial production) to reveal, as it spreads its domination over all of reality, its essential characteristics; five centuries to move from corporations to global industrialization, through manufactures, small- and then large-scale industry within national contexts; and finally the economic "cracking"¹⁰ of national sovereignties with the formation of a very small number of large productive ensembles or sets.

And these sets already know they are themselves only subsets of a set of all sets: the Industry-World (or what is the same thing, the Market-World).

When considering the full scope of this evolution, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that “commercial production” becomes modern not simply because it expanded at each stage of its evolution, nor simply because it each time equally accelerates the movement expressed in Marx’s famous formula M-C-M—not even, finally, because it spreads “all over the World.”¹¹ Recalling what was said a moment ago, the problem is not simply the acceleration of infinity: it only emerges when production is only possible on condition that it *incorporate* the lure of an infinity *in actu* (that is, a totality-in-itself) *into* its real development. From this moment, when the metaphysical *closed circuit* of its logic becomes indispensable to its effective functioning, production is forced (despite whatever explicit representations and intentions it might have—for example, moral ones) to *devour* so to speak every limit, external or internal.

Beginning with commerce in the strict sense: it does not become “world trade” simply because, from the moment of the Great Discoveries (Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Magellan, Marco Polo and company), it spreads to every part of the world. It only becomes world trade in an essential sense when all the components of trade (price of raw materials, labor costs, costs of transportation in all its forms, incessant change of technical methods, opening of new markets, monetary system, juridical regulation, etc.) first of all become increasingly interdependent factors, and secondly when these components are each determined at a global level. Moreover, the expression “World-Trade”¹² (here the “American” idiom best reveals what is at stake) comes to acquire its full ontological signification when it no longer simply signifies that the extension of trade to every dimension of the world has become the *essence* itself of trade or commerce, but also signifies this strange fact: “the world *is* commerce.” This means that all reality (not only in the “sphere” of commercial production, but also in the political, intellectual, artistic, educational and even religious “spheres”) *simply cannot be* without being submitted to trade or commerce, without entering into a commercial logic. From now on at work, as its “commercial side,” in every human activity, the abstract and infinite character of this logic, because it has nothing to do with the intrinsic characteristics and essential needs of the diverse spheres of activity that I have just mentioned, lets happen what Aristotle already understood had to happen the moment the least drop of infinity is mixed with what is by essence finite: the latter’s disappearance in a runaway infinitization.

The title I've chosen implies that we should limit ourselves to seeing how such a destiny is realized in the so-called "political" sphere. It is realized the moment the transcendental character of the political cause or concern—let's say: being responsible for being-in-common as such and in totality—becomes "modern" in the *complete* sense of this historical determination. This moment is reached when society, defined as a productive body, is able "to curb" (in the Humean sense) political responsibility itself. At this point, "moral values" are no longer able to govern a reality first of all and finally dedicated to "production"—even if they are constantly invoked (and Lord knows the unleashing of moralisms of every stripe is precisely a symptom of ethical paralysis), even if a cry demanding more freedom or justice still and always arises amongst the citizens, and perhaps stronger than ever, even if, finally, such values (and why not?) effectively inspire politicians. And yet moral exigencies can only ever be really "effective" within the horizon of modern reality as productive reality. The political concern for work and the worker, for example, is confined to preoccupations such as lowering the unemployment rate and/or the expansion of professional education, without ever being able to touch upon, much less transform, the reduction of all labor (including intellectual labor) to a simple expenditure of labor-power. "Labor-power" is not only an expression of Marx's critique of political economy, it designates the fact that, in its fulfilled modern determination, labor no longer offers the possibility for what Marx called the "essential forces of man" (and Heidegger the "*Dasein* in man") to invest and deploy himself in it.

It goes without saying that one could do a similar analysis with regard to the educational system and the cultural sector (an expression whose horror I'll let you savor); for the degeneration of the political function into techno-bureaucracy on the one hand and into a demagogic gang on the other, the degeneration of information into a collective formation into the Unformed as such, and of justice into an auxiliary of the police, etc. The important thing is not to be found in this picture that each of us can make on our own. Once again, what's important is found in the fact that, through all these phenomena, a same historical moment both realizes and dissimulates itself. This moment might be called *the invagination of totality*, the need to "keep everything under control."¹³ One can, from here, conceive of what happened in the Thirties as a sort of ontico-ontological scale model of what is for us the ontological threat pure and simple, without falling for all that into any naive confusion or extrapolation. It is with this, therefore, that I will finish.

There is in fact no doubt that the Weimar Republic's very particular situation explains the clarity with which the *need for totality* appeared.

Germany's historical setback after its defeat makes the political construction of Weimar appear as a simple facade barely dissimulating a *de facto* compromise between social and political groups: the best I can do here is refer to Franz Neumann's analyses concerning Weimar pluralism and the ideology of the "Catholic Center." It might be said that the political totality we call in French "*l'État*"—the State—has never been anything other than an *entité*: something "imaginary" (like every other form of identity). And it's true. But it's also true, at least if one accepts the teachings of Freud, Lacan, and Castoriadis, that the imaginary *functions*, whereas a simple facade only hides how all the other forces are at work. England, the USA and France entered modernity to the extent that the difference (or rather the tension) between diverse components of the productive body was contained and ordered by the symbolic weight of a transcendental "general Will." For the moment I leave aside the question of knowing whether and to what extent this process in which the real and symbolic overlap—always to some extent imaginary—was a neurotic process. I'll also refrain from posing a question about the collective paranoia modern productive bodies compulsively develop, from the moment they have to mobilize the totality in an explicit and realist manner—a demand that the totality, this imaginary being, can in no way satisfy. For these two disorders (in the medical sense) of modern societies are in fact an internal requirement of the ontological order to which they belong: the order in which they are still able to develop under the unconscious lure of the infinite *in actu*, or in which they have reached the limit at which they can only "progress" by incorporating.

I will point out that neither the first nor the second case corresponds to Germany in Hitler's time. The brutal monopolistic concentration of Capital and the runaway rationalization of industrial production Germany was experiencing were, in truth, unprecedented phenomena in Europe. A comparable phenomenon, it is true, took place at the same time in the USA. But the situations were very different. In the States, a powerful, popular anti-monopoly movement was able to develop, headed by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson themselves, resulting in the working class being able *both* to combat *and* assimilate such a rapid acceleration of infinite production. Nothing of the sort could happen at this time in Germany, where the unions and the socialist and communist parties, in conformity with the metaphysical side of Marx's thought, regarded monopolistic concentration as an inevitable step in the development of Capital: the German working class was thus purely and simply reduced to obedience. On the other hand, the captains of industry were confronted with a military caste and a caste of great landowners that never allied themselves—in contrast to the

English or French nobility since the seventeenth century—with a middle class composed of merchants and jurists. In this way, the political construction of Weimar Republic was only an empty frame into which heterogeneous social components (to say nothing of the diversity of national origins and religious faiths) were forced to enter, with no “*melting process in the modern pot.*”¹⁴

This is the reason why, if I’m not mistaken, that well before the 1929 crisis the absence of unity will give birth to a demand for *social uniformity* and *political guidance*, through which Germany had to be pushed to the highest level of production and modern technology, in order that it too might become a *powerful nation* in History.

What is important here is the fact that none of the three expressions I have just italicized has the same signification as the corresponding expressions in modern society in the strict sense. “Social uniformity” has nothing to do with the formal unity and material conformity such as they occur in an industrial democracy, no more than “political guidance” coincides with the classical notion of “government.” As for the issue of Germany’s ambition to become a power at the global level, the history of the 1930s has clearly shown that this was no ambition to join the “League of Nations” or to take part in the organization of production and trade on a global scale.

Beginning with social uniformity in the National Socialist sense: this uniformity belonged to a totally different order than the slow homogenization of *mores* that with us has come to be added on to the formal equality before the law. It has nothing do with the progressive leveling of a “*way of life*”¹⁵ by work and money—something that at this time was already, though to various degrees, a characteristic of modern societies in Europe and in America. National Socialism was a crude egalitarian ideal with a racial base, an ideal which moreover remained an empty ideal. Its real content was the direct mobilization of all commerce and every occupation—in short, of every “form of life”—under the will of the leader, thanks to a Nazi party that was proliferating in every branch of activity. This was an absolutely new process of unification, although in its beginnings some (among which probably the Catholic leaders) mistook it for a sort of remake¹⁶ of the premodern guild system. But in reality, this phenomenon’s essential signification should be sought in an interpretation of the famous expression that for a long time characterized its manifest aspects as being those of a “total mobilization.”

We should pay attention to the fact that the “totality” here in question is an ontico-ontological concept, not an ontological one. The fact that the mobilization should be “total” simply signifies that it will not spare the least parcel of the social substance. The ontological sense of

“total mobilization” is to be sought elsewhere, namely in the new historical concept hidden beneath the military metaphor. Becoming “mobile” signifies, for every social structure (whatever it may be: family, commerce, highways, sexual relations, sports, educational system, and even the natural and human sciences), the fact that it can receive whatever form required by the needs of the political adventure. Just as if it had no form of its own. Consequently, total mobilization signifies nothing other than the effort to reduce the social substance to a kind of plastic.

From here it is perhaps possible to see the extent to which the goal is here the same as the one at which our own democratic productive system takes aim, with this slight difference: the way in which every element of the social structure was reduced to an amorphous material at the disposal of an absolute and exterior political will was, in the thirties, immediate, patent, and brutal. It was an effort to produce radical changes *right in the midst of reality*. But as we said an instant ago, modern production—which at the same time produces the autonomous subject and automatic wealth—is an imaginary enterprise. As a result, the ontological absurdity that it harbors does not explode with the suddenness, the violence, or the grotesque cruelty that the Nazi “revolution” demonstrated. Modern infinity works softly, with temporary measures and palliatives of all sorts. It is also capable of disguising, under various moral or social “justifications,” evolutions that have in reality been planned for a single and sole reason: the growth of wealth. I will restrict myself here to a single example of this that is in Europe particularly virulent despite the fact that here, in the United States, its illusory character and even its perverse consequences have already been recognized for some time. I am speaking of the attempt—“anywhere and everywhere”—to model the educational system to conform with the needs of industrial and commercial enterprises. The result is an extremely disconcerting situation in which a new type of student, supposedly “professionally trained,” turns out to be incapable of renewing the know-how already acquired, since he or she lacks any theoretical knowledge worthy of the name and is for this very reason incapable of keeping up with the ceaseless changes in methods, materials, and languages. One wonders whether all the burning calls in favor of adapting the educational system to the needs of the business world are not in fact the symptom of a “becoming-business” of education itself. I leave totally to the side the fact—a fact, moreover, whose memory has been almost completely effaced from our minds by Modernity—that the highest and most necessary end of education should be the introduction of humanity to what, both in the first foundation and in the final ends of

every type of knowledge or art, remains essentially useless: i.e., a sort of free play and formal pleasure.

Employment—or rather the dialectic of employment and unemployment—would furnish us another example. Skilled labor would with equal evidence show us what the misadventures of professionally trained students has taught us on a larger scale and with more serious consequences. But permit me, since we do not have enough time, to refer you here to the analysis of the new occupations and the flexibility of employment I published in the Californian journal *Topoi* (October 1988) under the title, “Who comes after the subject?”¹⁷

The important point I’d like this time to underline is that the infinite process of the growth of production has crossed the limit beyond which it can no longer dissimulate its inherent need for totality. This is just as true for the inner totality as it is for the exterior totality: that is, with regard to social and political life within a given productive body as well as the “new order” the industrialized and rich nations are trying to impose upon the rest of the world. It is time to draw from this some conclusions. There will only be two, and they will be brief:

1. The first is that we can only await, in the future (a “future” that in truth has already widely cut into our present), the *sursauts*¹⁸ of the *finite* before this growing colonization of every intra-worldly domain by the “totalization of infinity” that is the historical motor of our whole history (and of all our histories): i.e. by the invagination of the formality of the world into the very tissue and regime of the “realities” themselves.

2. The second is that, by “*sursauts*,” I do not necessarily understand something beneficial, healthy. Agony also has its *sursauts*. The term generally belongs, for better or worse, to the discourse of the politician, whose primary characteristic is to call for the *sursaut* of a certain “idea,” an idea that is still the idea of a certain “reality,” posited or supposed (supposed to be posited). So it goes for the idea of a national reality, but equally for that of international law. But if all these discourses are called “political” (or “politicking,” meaning they are incapable of opening up any politics), it is precisely because they fail to perceive that every reality from now on steals away, being *already* transformed into a simple material to be used in the realization of the lure we have described.

This second conclusion might seem disillusioned, and it is true that it implies a certain renunciation of any “action” that would for the moment be definable. But it is not to be placed alongside those lamenting “decadence.” To the contrary, it tries to give a glimpse of the fact that the very shrinking back of the becoming-world of Production—which in no way appears “definitive” or “irremediable,” for why would the totalization of the infinite have received the promises of the

future?—before every attempt to “get a hold of it” opens for us the possibility of another step back: that of a work of thought preparing us to seize the *καιρός* of multiple future battles for a totally new world-making, as soon as this “opportune moment” arises. For we refuse to admit that the other, inopportune moment can really come, the one in which whatever intelligence and courage we have left would be reduced to the dazed discovery that the following ultra-banal and hundred-times heard verbal sequence has the value of a speculative proposition or an oracular utterance that, alas, was deciphered too late:

“Please step back from the edge of the platform. The doors will close automatically.”

Translated by Jason Smith

NOTES

1. A reference to the shores of America, this paper having been given in English (in a slightly different version) at the New School for Social Research in New York in November 1990. [The present text was originally published in *Les Temps Modernes*, February 1993, pp. 60-85, and subsequently collected in Gérard Granel, *Études* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), pp. 67-89.—Trans.]
2. The authors’ emphases. The texts just cited are borrowed from François Fédier’s *Heidegger—anatomie d’un scandale*, which refutes the pseudo-historical montage invented by a certain Victor Farias. [See François Fédier, *Heidegger—anatomie d’un scandale* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1988), and Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, trans. Dominic di Bernardi, Paul Burrell, Gabriel Ricci (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). Farias’ book was originally written in Spanish and translated into French in 1987; the English text appears to have been translated from the French translation.—Trans.]
3. [Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (London: V. Gollantz, 1943).—Trans.]
4. [This text, originally published in *La Révolution prolétarienne* 158 (1933), is now collected in vol. 1, Tome II of *Écrits historiques et politiques, L’engagement syndical (1927-juillet 1934)*, ed. Gérard Leroy (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1988), pp. 260-81.—Trans.]
5. [In English in the original—Trans.]
6. [Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 22.—Trans.]

7. [These lines are those uttered in a famous monologue of Goethe's *Faust*. See *Goethe's Faust*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 92-3.—Trans.]
8. [The term *matériau* is generally used to refer to materials employed in construction or fabrication, as when one speaks in English of building “materials.” The tendency pushing “matter” [*matière*] toward the “material” [*matériau*] marks a passage from a matter whose form would be immanent to that matter itself, therefore posing a limit to the play, or work, of transformation, to the absolute plasticity of a matter offering no resistance, and therefore no limit, to a process that thereby becomes unlimited, infinite.—Trans.]
9. [The term “*puissance*” is here translated as “powers”—while “*pouvoir*” is given as “power”—in conformity both with the English translation of Dominique Janicaud's *The Powers of the Rational: Science, Technology and the Future of Thought*, trans. Elizabeth Birmingham and Peg Birmingham (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), as well as the expression “powers of darkness.”—Trans.]
10. [In English in the original—Trans.]
11. [The expression in quotes is in English in the original—Trans.]
12. [In English in the original—Trans.]
13. [In English in the original—Trans.]
14. [This slightly awkward phrase is in English in the original—Trans.]
15. [In English in the original—Trans.]
16. [In English in the original—Trans.]
17. [See Gérard Granel, “Who Comes after the Subject?,” trans. Eduardo Cadava and Anne Tomiche, in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 148-56. This is the publication, in book-format, of what was in fact the September 1988 issue of *Topoi*, guest edited by Jean-Luc Nancy. The French text is published in *Études logiques et politiques* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1990).—Trans.]
18. [No adequate translation of the term “*sursaut*” has been found. Its semantic range is most generally that of a sudden commencement, and might be said to resonate in the difference between the active “to start” and an involuntary “to be startled.” A *sursaut* is what is undergone in the brusque awakening initiated by an alarm clock, as well as the last-minute surge of, for example, a candidate at the polls. It can have the sense of “outburst,” while also signifying a “boost.” Finally, “*dernier sursaut*” is perfectly translated as “last gasp.”—Trans.]