

Boris Groys

Anti-philosophy and the Politics of Recognition

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It is a well-known fact that contemporary philosophy is pluralistic – it includes many conflicting and even mutually exclusive traditions, trends, and individual positions. In this respect, contemporary philosophy is reminiscent of the plurality found in Sophist schools of the pre-Socratic period. And today's reader is in a situation that is not very different from the situation in which Socrates found himself while listening to Sophistic speeches. From the perspective of the listener, every Sophistic speech seemed fascinating and persuasive. But the total sum of Sophistic discourse presented itself as a theater of the absurd – entertaining and idiotic at the same time. Instead of becoming educated and transcending the position of a listener, Socrates proposed a counterprogram: to radicalize this position, to turn it into a zero position of radical non-knowledge, and to reject even the knowledge that the listener believed themselves to have before listening to the Sophists. Socrates's counterprogram marked the end of the Sophist schools, but it was also the beginning of the one and only truly philosophical question: How to reach the zero point of knowledge, the state of suspension of all opinions? To use the vocabulary of Husserlian phenomenology: How can the philosopher commit an act of *epoche* – a suspension of all judgments and opinions – and thus occupy a meta-position in relation to the culture in which they live?

The difficulty in taking this philosophical position is more practical than theoretical. When confronted with the plurality of persuasive speeches, the subject can easily be resistant to making a choice, and try to analyze the logical structure of these speeches instead of simply accepting or rejecting them. However, the question remains: To what degree can philosophers free themselves of all opinions if they continue to live in the middle of a society whose opinions they reject? It is obvious that such a rejection makes life difficult, if not impossible. Socrates was killed by the society in which he lived. But the consequences of *epoche* should not necessarily be so dramatic as to make the life of a philosopher impossible. Even if philosophers are not directly endangered by the existing ideological powers, they are immersed in the everyday life of their society. Thus, to be able to survive in this society they have to accept almost all of its opinions. For example, philosophers have to eat and drink and so they have to accept societal opinions with respect to what is edible and drinkable and what is not. And in the contemporary world, they also have to cross the street on the green light and not the red light, and use their computers in an appropriate way. If philosophers found

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themselves unable to cope with everyday life and contemporary technology, they would die rather soon. Thus, in order to be consequential, the philosopher has to accept death as a possible and even probable result of the act of *epoche*. Socrates was ready to accept the death of his empirical self because he believed that a part of his soul remained immortal – and so he could sacrifice his earthly life in the name of eternal life in a society of gods.

The eternal part of the soul was obviously not involved in the struggle for economic survival or in political quarrels; that means it was not involved in practical life. Rather, this part of the soul allowed the philosopher to practice a life of pure contemplation. And crucially, this practice of contemplation let the philosopher participate in eternity and immortality here and now. For Plato, there was no difference between divine and human modes of the contemplation of geometrical figures and the logical and mathematical laws which they obey. A divine spectator does not see geometrical forms any differently than a human spectator – if this spectator is a philosopher. Geometry, mathematics, and logic do not change in time. That means that even if a philosopher contemplates them for a short period of time, they already become immortal and eternal during this period. In turn, this period of immortality means that the philosopher can see the world in which they live from the standpoint of eternity – from a divine standpoint – even if they remain mortal. The world is in flux, but squares and triangles do not change. That means that the philosopher is able to interrupt the flow of life by repeating these periods of contemplation. And what is even more important to understand is that this series of repetitions is not limited by the mortal life of the philosopher. Anyone who contemplates a square or a triangle would see the same thing the philosopher sees. Anyone who performs Cartesian radical doubt would find themselves in the same position as Descartes found himself. This series of repetitions, this possibility of returning to a past moment, also offers a standpoint from which a critique of society becomes possible. Society is permanently changing. One cannot move back in time and return to the same state of societal affairs. This means that participation in the life of society precludes the possibility of reaching the state of eternity, and thus prevents true wisdom. Through its permanent change, society demonstrates to us our mortality, finitude, and even irrelevance: because of the state of permanent change, everything that we do becomes cancelled by the next generation. Plato's answer to this problem is well known: one has to create a state that does not change in

time. The philosopher who lives in such an immortal – because unchanging and unchangeable – state can reunite the immortal and mortal parts of their soul. All the philosophical utopias that followed were also constructed as unchanging and unchangeable – as images of eternity, as expansions of the short periods of individual philosophical contemplation to the whole timeline of human history, as attempts to end history and enter an order that would last forever.

During the period of modernity and as an effect of secularization, belief in the immortality of the soul disappeared. It was replaced by a belief in the institution as bearer of the philosophical attitude – belief, in other words, in academia. Accordingly, the immortal component of the philosopher's soul was replaced by his or her academic position. Within this belief system, philosophers die, but their academic positions remain immortal: their books are reprinted, commented upon, and taught. In a certain sense academia was designed as an eternal Platonic philosophical state in the middle of ever-changing political realities. Thus, in modernity, philosophy became institutionalized and academicized: the philosopher became a professor of philosophy. This is not the place to trace the whole history of the institutionalization of philosophy, but in any case, within this trajectory, philosophers ceased to be subjects of contemplation. In our time, their position is no longer a meta-position, but rather an academic position. Accordingly, their main task is to transmit the knowledge of philosophy – defined as the sum of historically known philosophical teachings – to the next generation. Philosophy came to be part of a professional education, embedded in the system of production and administration of so-called “human capital.”

Soon enough, the supposedly independent and eternal character of academia was demonstrated to be an illusion. After all, academia is a bureaucratic institution embedded in the larger bureaucratic and institutional system of the modern state. The philosopher is expected to publish, to participate in university administration, and in many cases to practice fundraising. In other words, for contemporary philosophers, philosophy is a way to make a living – a means by which philosophers support themselves and their families. Accordingly, philosophers are involved in agonistic struggles for positions, prestige, publications, and salary. What the contemporary philosopher does not practice is the ideal of disinterested contemplation. In other words, throughout the period of modernity, philosophy was transformed from a mode of contemplation into a mode of work. The philosopher became a worker like any

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other worker – including manual work, because the philosopher is supposed to write, and writing is basically manual work. Speaking in contemporary terms, philosophers have become “content providers” – but they are simultaneously unable to give form to the content they provide. This form is given by the regime under which they operate. That means precisely that philosophy ceases to be an autonomous, sovereign, and self-defined form of life. Instead, the life of a philosopher gets its form from the outside – from bureaucracy, political administration, or from an academic institution.

Hegel saw it very well: the only thing that the philosopher as a professor of philosophy can contemplate is the history of philosophy. Post-historical modernity, by contrast, is defined by a system of laws and rules that one cannot contemplate but can only respect and obey. So philosophy as the history of contemplation comes to its end – and a new era of working (writing and teaching) begins. And this teaching is not so much the work of persuasion as the work of dissuasion – the demonstration that the time of new insights and new evidence is over. According to Hegel, after the French Revolution all the masters had perished, and death remained the only but absolute master. As a worker among other workers, the philosopher is also subjected to the fear of death. And that means that philosophers can no longer overcome this fear through the act of *epoche*. Accordingly, they have to operate inside the system of laws that protect and at the same time limit them. When Husserl later tried to revive the old philosophical ethos and thematized the act of *epoche*, he understood it to take place in the realm of “as if.” Thus, the philosophical *epoche* was transposed into the realm of pure imagination – it was no longer a form of life but merely an artistically imagined form.

However, through this act of closure, the Hegelian system produced a new outside for philosophy. It was no longer a metaphysical, but rather a meta-institutional social space. It is in this space that the philosopher began to look for forms of life that were not regulated by the same system of rules under which the philosopher operated – as a professor, as a public servant, and as a fearful, law-abiding citizen. In other words, in this meta-institutional social space the philosopher found forms of life that suspended the fear of death – not as a result of a conscious decision, but rather in an involuntary manner. We can speak here about persecuted persons and also persons that take mortal risks by going into battle – whether military or revolutionary. Later I will write more extensively about these outsider, meta-forms-of-life. Here it is important to

underline that these forms of life are far from being contemplative. In this sense they are not only non-philosophical, but directly anti-philosophical. We are concerned here with meta-positions that are not consciously and strategically produced but imposed on subjects by their particular life situation. Such an involuntary, imposed meta-position cannot automatically lead to philosophical contemplation. But the position can be recognized – either by the subjects themselves or by a professional philosopher – as a point from which the world can be phenomenologically described. One can say that in this case the state of *epoche* is not produced by a philosopher but recognized as a philosophical readymade. Here an obvious analogy can be seen between anti-philosophy and anti-art in the sense in which we speak of anti-art as the use of readymades in the context of art, instead of the production of artworks. Analogously, one can speak about the use of the non-philosophical, involuntary states of *epoche* as philosophical meta-positions in the context of philosophy.

The first examples of such readymade meta-forms-of-life were proposed almost immediately after the academic success of the Hegelian system. Thus, Marx speaks about the proletariat as having no real, human life; he characterizes the proletariat as living the life of a machine in the dead zone of alienation created by the Industrial Revolution. For Marx, this makes the individual proletarian a universal individual, and the proletariat a universal class. In other words, Marx diagnosed the state of the proletariat as intolerable, but at the same time recognized that this state offers the possibility of a commitment that would lead the philosopher beyond the limitations of the society in which they live. That possibility gives philosophers a chance to reject their inherited class position, reject their role inside the academic system, and recognize the position of the proletariat as a true philosophical position, as a state of *epoche*. By doing so philosophers take a meta-position vis-à-vis society: they are able to describe this society in its totality and change it in a revolutionary manner. And here it is important to see that the philosophical tradition is the only one that allows for the recognition of the position of the proletariat as a meta-position, which has to be taken as a precondition for the revolutionary transformation of society.

Indeed, the word “recognition” is politically ambivalent. A politics of recognition is often understood as a politics of including the excluded. But such a politics of inclusion, which presupposes the improvement of the living conditions of the excluded, is precisely directed towards the elimination of the meta-position

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that is occupied by the excluded. The politics of total inclusion aims to get rid of the space outside of society, to eliminate any external, potentially critical position towards society as a whole. This politics calls for everybody to play by the same rules, to obey the same laws, to pursue the same goals, to be seen and treated like everybody else and to see and treat everybody else in the same way. Obviously, this inclusivist recognition runs contrary to a philosophical, exclusivist recognition that does not aim to integrate the excluded into the societal whole but rather uses the recognized precisely as a point outside the society from which this whole can be contemplated, criticized, and eventually transformed. Politically, here lies the difference between social-democratic and communist politics – between improving the situation of the working class inside the existing bourgeois society and establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat. It is important to see that the choice between inclusivist and exclusivist forms of recognition does not depend on “what the working class really wants.” The reason for this is very simple: the individual members of the working class are confronted by the same choice. They too can try to become integrated into society and make a career inside it, or they can try to change it in its entirety. If the subject chooses the path of philosophical recognition, they also choose the path of revolutionary activism – or in other words, they choose the risk of death.

Around the same time that Marx looked for those excluded from modern, industrial society – the excluded to whom a philosopher could be committed – Kierkegaard was interested in the act of commitment itself. In the Denmark of his time, there was no proletariat – no working class comparable to the English proletariat that Marx examined. Danish society was a Protestant Christian society. And so Kierkegaard asked himself how his contemporaries might have reacted to encountering Christ, and invited his readers to de-historicize the figure of Christ, to reenact the first meeting with Christ in their imagination. Here again there are two possible reactions to the figure of Christ. One can look at such an encounter from a sociological point of view and see in it a typical phenomenon of its time and milieu – as Kierkegaard says, there were many at that time who proclaimed themselves to be sons of God. In this case one should strive to reintegrate these unfortunate, delusional people into society. Or one could recognize Christ as the only Son of God – and follow him as the apostles did. This second option was of course dangerous, because it meant self-exclusion from the society of that time. And it also implied a risk of death. Thus,

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Kierkegaard develops the theory of a call that beckons the individual who follows it to leave the societal framework, but at the same time connects this individual to the universal. Such an individual can also commit crimes (if seen from the ordinary point of view) and in this way break their connection to social “normality,” but still remain faithful to a universality of a higher order. Kierkegaard speaks about the authentic call being radically new – and thus being opposed to recollection, or anamnesis, as practiced by platonic Socrates. Thus, there is no criterion that would allow the individual to make a choice between inclusive and exclusive recognition – between trivializing the other and ascribing to the other exclusive, superhuman, divine value. At the same time, there is no chance to escape this call through, for example, finding something like a neutral, secure territory beyond the choice that this call imposes. As a result, the individual is placed in a situation of infinite doubt, infinite hesitation that can be resolved only by a “leap of faith” – by a decision to commit to the other without any proof that the other is really Christ and not simply a person like everybody else. The leap of faith places its subject outside of society – and thus opens up the possibility of criticizing and transforming this society. Kierkegaard does not discuss another possible decision: to recognize the other as trivial, as human, all too human. Such a decision also closes the infinite perspective of doubt and hesitation. But it brings its subjects back into the social framework and does not allow them to take a meta-position towards their cultural context.

Here the decision to commit oneself to the excluded substitutes for the traditional philosophical self-exclusion through contemplation. The subject of this decision answers a call in the most radical way. So one could see here an anti-philosophical gesture, insofar as philosophy is understood as a resistance to all forms of persuasion. However, (anti-)philosophers follow only the call that brings them outside their society, their cultural context. In other words, they have a certain criterion for their choice – and are not in the situation of infinite uncertainty, indecision, and hesitation. The calls themselves are always new and historically contingent. But the decision to answer the call is a repetition insofar as it repeats the decisions of previous philosophers who answered the calls that brought them outside the social whole.

Now, it's possible to argue that even if the act of answering a call brings the philosopher outside their own culture, it is a voluntary act – and as such remains under suspicion of being produced by certain cultural determinations. Nietzsche seems to break with all these

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determinations, because his *Übermensch* acts under the pressure of vital forces that compel him to live dangerously, to risk death. The *Übermensch* has too much energy within him to contain it. He has to expend this energy – together with his life. Nietzsche presents himself as the most radical enemy of the traditional ideal of philosophical contemplation, and thus as the most radical anti-philosopher. He praises vitality, passion, strength, will to power – all the qualities that a typical philosopher obviously lacks. For Nietzsche, the traditional philosophical contemplative meta-position is simply a manifestation of the physical and psychological weakness of philosophers that prevents them from making war, struggling for power, and risking their lives.

At the same time, Nietzsche presents himself as an insightful psychologist who is able to differentiate between somebody who is too weak to become active in life and therefore prefers death, and somebody who goes towards death because his vital energy cannot be contained by his mortal body. Here one is confronted with a choice that is not so different from the choice that Kierkegaard described. Due to his preference for explosive vital energies over weakness, Nietzsche is able to take a meta-position not only towards the society of decadence and decay in which he lives, but also towards the whole history of philosophy. Here eternal vital energy replaces eternal cosmic order and the intensity of life and desire replaces mathematical evidence. This shows that the position Nietzsche and his followers such as Bataille or Deleuze take is, in fact, perfectly traditional. Energy, vitality, desire – all of these are impersonal and eternal forces that always already act in and through human beings and are only revealed in the moment of the ecstatic acceptance of the risk of death. This moment is unique, but the forces that are manifested in this moment are not. And philosophical discourse's appropriation of this moment as being analogous to the state of philosophical *epoche* is also merely a repetition.

One can argue that all philosophers following anti-philosophical traditions combined Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Thus Heidegger describes the state of philosophical *epoche* as a state of perfect boredom: one becomes bored by everything to the same degree and is thus able to discover one's own subjectivity as being bored by existence in the world. Characteristically, Heidegger describes the state of being bored at dinner with his academic colleagues as the closest thing to this radical boredom. This state of boredom is not sought by philosophers – it just happens to them. From a Nietzschean standpoint, Heidegger

describes the decadent state of weak life. But it is this boredom that makes the philosopher open to the clearings of Being (*Lichtungen des Seins*) that offer the chance to take a meta-position towards the whole of the world. According to Heidegger, these chances are always temporal and contingent, and because of that, always illusory. However, the philosopher's approach towards these openings should be one of decisiveness (*Entschlossenheit*) – meaning a readiness to enter these openings – if the philosopher wants to become important within the history of philosophy. Of course, Heidegger can be easily criticized for this requirement of decisiveness, which can be interpreted as political engagement. In his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger defends himself against this suspicion. He distances himself from Sartre and Sartre's call for political engagement by writing that he, Heidegger, is engaged by Being and for Being, and not by and for any political movement. However, the practical effect of this engagement with Being is not so distant from Sartre's. And Sartre's description of radical nausea as the beginning point of the philosophical mode of existence is not very far from Heideggerian radical boredom – which is also a decadent state of weakness that is compensated for by the energetic act of engagement as a reaction to a political call.

The problem of engagement is central for Derrida, who returns to Kierkegaardian indecisiveness in all his books, including *Spectres of Marx*, in which Derrida compares his attitude towards the spectre of communism to Hamlet's indecision towards the spectre of his father: both ask themselves to what degree the spectre is real. For Derrida, this ontological "indecidability" (in Derrida's term) is a precondition for a free political decision for or against communism – as Kierkegaard believed himself to be free to decide whether he was for or against Christ. However, this freedom of decision is illusory because the requirement to decide is imposed on the subject by an external call and by social pressure. In the case of Kierkegaard, it is the call of Christianity; in Derrida's case, it is the call of Marxism. And in the both cases it is obvious that the philosophical tradition requires the philosopher to recognize this call and make a choice one way or the other. To simply reject this call – and even to remain hesitant – prevents the philosopher from taking a meta-position towards the society in which he lives.

Indeed, one understands society much better from the position of exclusion than from living inside it. When one lives in society, one overlooks it, and its real mechanisms remain hidden. For the same reason, the majority is

structurally silent – it has no need to articulate itself. It understands itself without words. But if one is foreign, other, unexpected – then one shows oneself and has to practice self-explanation. And, as I said, when it comes to this necessity, it makes no difference whether I brought myself to this situation of exclusion or somebody else brought it about. The truth is always on the side of the excluded. To recognize the excluded means not to include the excluded, but precisely to recognize this truth – to accept the dignity of the slave by rejecting all property and working hard (Christianity), or to accept the dictatorship of the proletariat (communism). It would not make sense to give a saint or a revolutionary a regular income and a comfortable life of consumption.

But what about the contemporary situation? It was said that in the context of ancient Greek society the philosopher occupied a position of privilege, but one cannot say the same about contemporary society. Indeed, one can argue that Christianity already changed the situation of the masses vis-à-vis philosophy. Indeed, Christianization led to a radical transformation not only of the dominant culture, but also of the ordinary life of the population as a whole. Here ordinary people were affected to the same degree as the traditional elites. The call was directed towards everybody – and everybody had to make a choice: to accept Christianity as one religion among many others, and thus to incorporate it into the existing social whole, or to accept Christianity as a meta-position – and thereby subject this whole to Christian rule. The same question arose in the case of bourgeois democratic revolutions, and later, communist revolutions. Here what once seemed to be philosophical privilege becomes a mass phenomenon. However, as an effect of this development, the opposition between inclusion/exclusion becomes problematic, confusing, and controversial. One can argue that a certain social group is excluded, but then one can further argue that a certain other social group is even more excluded or that there is a group that is excluded inside the excluded group and, thus, doubly excluded, etc. We all know this problematic. What is the best way to deal with this problematic in the sense of a philosophical politics of recognition? This can be answered in the following way: the philosopher should always be on the side of exclusion and the excluded. The philosophical politics of recognition has often been criticized for wanting things to get worse (i.e., more confrontational). But this is not true. Philosophers are not misanthropic – they simply do not want to lose their view of the social whole.

However, one can argue that today, philosophers themselves are excluded as never

before. There are many reasons for this exclusion. But I would suggest that the most important reason is this: even if so-called postmodernity is over, one has a feeling that the most important philosophical positions, such as Christianity, democracy, and communism, have run their historical course and have become too compromised to remain promising and inspirational. In fact, we are still living in a post-Hegelian paradigm and tend to think that the time of big ideas is over and, accordingly, philosophy cannot offer us anything beyond the proof of its own irrelevance. Now, the examples that I have just cited show that even if a certain ideological phenomenon was already included in the historical process, its philosophical recognition requires seeing it as radically new, as if coming from outside of society. It is the same “as if” that Husserl speaks of when characterizing the philosophical *epoche*. Recognition is re-enactment. Thus, Kierkegaard, while living inside a society that considered itself Christian, imagined himself meeting Christ for the first time. To re-cognize certain ideas and attitudes means defamiliarizing them – to look at them as if they just emerged. Here again the analogy with the art of readymades is helpful. When an artist chooses a readymade and recognizes it as a work of art, they look at this readymade as new – even if it already circulated in the context of ordinary life. And when it is put into the museum, this readymade remains forever new – whereas similar objects are slowly destroyed in the context of their ordinary use. Analogously, philosophical positions remain forever new in the archive of philosophy – even if their realization in “real life” seemed to lead to their historical exhaustion. The philosophical archive is external to the world, excluded from ordinary life and the social whole. It is not accidental that everybody who thinks “practically” always despises philosophical ideas and positions, dismissing them as irrelevant in the context of “real life.” However, this externality of philosophy means precisely that certain ideas and positions can be taken from the philosophical archive, re-cognized as new, and implemented independently of their former historical use.

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Boris Groys is a philosopher, essayist, art critic, media theorist, and an internationally renowned expert on Soviet-era art and literature, especially the Russian avant-garde. He is a Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, a Senior Research Fellow at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, and a professor of philosophy at the European Graduate School (EGS). His work engages radically different traditions, from French post-structuralism to modern Russian philosophy, yet is firmly situated at the juncture of aesthetics and politics. Theoretically, Groys's work is influenced by a number of modern and postmodern philosophers and theoreticians, including Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and Walter Benjamin.

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