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On the Envy of the Servant and the Benevolence of the Master

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I

Defecation as revenge

This anecdotal story took place in Vienna in the beginning of 1990s. After the demise of the Soviet Union, several writers from the impoverished former Soviet republic of Georgia were invited for a residency by one of the Austrian cultural foundations to be accommodated in picturesque villas in Vienna. The residency implied not only staying and traveling in Austria, but meeting with Austrian writers and artists, readings, negotiations about translation projects – in short, a collaboration and an attempt to integrate the cultural workers of post-Soviet Georgia into the "European" cultural context. In spite of such a hospitable reception, before leaving his residency, one of the well-known Georgian writers smashed furniture in his residential apartment, tore the curtains down, and defecated on the floor in the apartment.

In the film, “The Green Elephant” (*Zelioniy Slonik*, 1999), by Russian artist and filmmaker Svetlana Baskova,[1] two officers of the military service are placed in a detainment cell for certain violations. One is an urban citizen, the other an uneducated villager. The hierarchy is immediately clear: the former is the superior, the latter is the inferior. The rural resident has no means to resist the obvious advantage and dominating position of the urban one. Hence, he tacitly complies with his inferior position and enacts the ceremony of servitude in relation to his superior companion. However, at some point the villager brings his conduct to excessive anomalous friendliness, evolving rather as grotesque impunity. As a result, the villager’s carnivalesque servility is experienced as an annoying disturbance by his urban companion. Later, in response to the urban officer’s snobbish irritation, the villager defecates while his roommate sleeps, spreads his excrement around, then wakes up his companion and childishly offers him his excrement as a meal on a plate.

One more episode comes from the play “Communion,”[2] which unfolds as the clash of the two characters, the subaltern hired worker, Dia, and the representative of the cultural elite, designer and her employer, Nita. When Nita returns to her apartment after a meeting, she collides with Dia on her way to the toilet.

Nita:
What, were you just in my bathroom?
It’s for my use only,
you know you’re not allowed in that one,
I didn’t expect this from you.
I told you when I hired you.
that toilet’s for me and for my guests,

and the one over there for all the workers and you.
We'll have to cut you 20 percent for that.

Dia:
I didn't mean it, I always use the other one,
I swear it was an accident, I just went in without thinking.
And hadn't you decided I'm your friend?

Nita:
What? I see, you've been taking your shits regularly here.
And I asked you so nicely, like a friend would.

Dia:
Nita, I swear, I didn't use it a single time before today,
it was a complete accident that I went in there just now.
Please don't fire me.
Remember? You're baptizing me tomorrow!

Nita (*opens the bathroom door*):
What a nightmare stink in there,
you couldn't even flush the toilet properly.

Dia:
Hold on, I'll clean up everything,
if there is a spiritual bond between us,
what difference does it make who shits in which toilet?

Nita:
How dare you talk to me like that,
after everything we have done to help you,
ungrateful whore.

Dia:
That's not what I meant,

I was trying to say . . .
Well, just that we are so close in spirit, our hearts are now one,
and so, the body's involved anyway,
isn't it?

Nita:
A spiritual connection is about power above all,
the power of the one with greater spirit, —
who then passes the spirit to you, shares it.

Dia:
No, Nita, I do understand,
I admire you, your spirit,
and your immaculate beauty,
I believe and hope and love,
I wouldn't give you up for anyone.
You said you would be my godmother.
That means I'm yours forever,
Then you're closer to me than my husband or son.
Scream at me as much as you like,
it's the fear of being inside us that screams,
it's not you or I,
it's the cowardly serpent inside,
we have no idea who or what we are,
mundane life invades us, makes it all dreams,
we are not we.

Nita:
Listen, enough, and I think you're taking too long with your work.

Dia:
Don't fire me, please, I beg,
Then when could you baptize me?

I thought I would gain a sister in you,
I love you . . .
Nita:
Right, I forgot about the christening.
That we will definitely do.[3]

The act of defecation in these three cases becomes the *Real* that stands behind the hospitality of the superior hosts to reveal the envy and resentment of the inferior guests.

In the last two examples, though, we witness the emergence of unofficial heterotopic sites that conceal a segregation between the protagonists; they contrive fictitious equality between the explicitly unequal social agents: the inferior/the guest, and the superior/the host. These two fictitious heterotopic sites are the *prison* and the *church*: the site of punishment where all are equal, and the site of ritualistic communion, where social differences disappear. In this case, the authority of the host and the humility of the guest are disguised by the performance of brotherhood and sisterhood, by kinship.

Interestingly, the informal mode of address between the prisoners – in the organized criminal groups or mafia gangs – is "brother." In Baskova's film, the villager addresses his urban companion as "*bratishka*," diminutive for brother. In "Communion," too, we hear an appeal for sisterhood, which is a regular form of address in churches and monasteries. A strange potlatch takes place in this case between the superior and the inferior. The superior tempts the inferior by informal conduct and familial care, whereas the inferior provides for the superior the acts of "unofficial" devotion that surpass any social roles and institutions. The inferior, thus,

alleviates the superior's tacit guilt caused by his/her abuse of the servant, and enables the superior to fully experience his/her charitable benevolence.

Yet this informal heterotopia of "love and friendship" has its limits, being a sort of an agreed game. The problems in it arise when the "gamer," usually the candid inferior, takes the spectacle of the "familial" bond seriously and believes that there are genuine bonds of devotion, faithfulness, dedication, or of equality and love. In that case, the inferior demands literal implementation of what, in the codex of hospitality and kinship, was simply a formal mode of rhetoric (this is what Dia, the protagonist of "The Communion," does). And when the rhetoric of friendship, which was expected to be a heterotopic relief from instituted civic inequalities, reveals itself as nothing but a formal communicative regime – not less hypocritical than the official civic modes of institutional charity – then the inferior bursts into a rage triggered by the following inner reasoning: "if our friendship was merely a rhetoric and 'my' body seems too profane to construct a common body with 'you,' if 'your' true attitude to 'me' is condescension, then 'I' will provoke you to reveal what utterly stands behind this promise of friendship – indifference, fear, and contempt."

Interestingly, parents are almost never repelled by the excrements of their little children._Likewise, siblings don't feel squeamish about it either. It's known from child psychology how often children, even when they are old enough, still crap their pants in order to test their parents' devotion. The logic of such perverse demand is the following: "if you want to prove the genuineness of your love, you can only do it by enduring my shit."

Meanwhile, at the point when the conduct of an inferior libertine reaches such a scatological level, he does not cherish any hope of

getting any attention from a friended superior (unlike children who still hope to squeeze out their parents' care through naughty impunity). It is rather meant as an anarchic sacrilege that cannot be reverted to any kind of friendship anymore. Yet it still contains the lexicon of a "spoilt child's" cheeky conduct; as if implying: "aren't we the family members, didn't you say 'my home is your home'; then here I am, complying with your own offer of familial commons."

The conduct of the villager in "The Green Elephant" is precisely such an anarchic libertinage of a "spoilt child" against the indifference of a superior subject for whom this person is completely redundant. Yet we never know whether it is the genuine naivety of a candid barbarian, or the calculated revenge for misrecognition on behalf of an inferior. It is precisely at this moment when the benevolent "master," who tried to maintain this fake site of equality, becomes outraged himself. In Baskova's film, the urban prisoner, fed up by the buffooning of the villager, merely starts to mercilessly beat him. In "Communion," the rage of the servant erupts after the insolent offense by the "benevolent" master, who declared friendship and equality just a few hours before. Dia, the repair worker, fiercely attacks the hostess, yet she does not do it at all because of an unpaid job, but because the promised friendship happened to be a false ceremony.

Thus, in the unofficial heterotopia of kinship (a quasi-feudal communicative paradigm), the hypocritical civic correctness is surpassed to be compensated by the codex of brotherhood. While the regime of legal civility fails to conceal its hypocrisy in formal lexicons, the informal regime of unofficial intimacy of "genuine friendship" enacts "sincerity," but is thereby in danger of falling into the trap of crude violence or even a game of sado-masochism. Such sado-masochist transposition is very obvious in Baskova's

"The Green Elephant." Similarly, when we were staging the play *Communion,*[4] we intended the plot to evolve as the struggle for emancipation on behalf of the guest-worker, who would bring the employer-hostess to cathartic self-critique of her hypocrisy and would thus transform her false rhetoric into genuine friendliness. Metanoia in the conduct of the hostess would assert the honesty of the worker as positioned against the false benevolence of her superior employer; but what became evident was a more complicated and malign disposition. Namely, we had to deal with the perverse sado-masochist dialectics inscribed in the intentions of both – the master and the servant. Instead of both agents becoming the potential universal subjects of emancipation, what came to the surface and remained irreversible was the twist of the host's patronizing care into the sadistic authority, and the subversion of the servant's concealed envy into the transgressive or scatological conduct.

II

Ataraxia

In fact, Hegel in his short passage on the lord and bondsman dialectics touches upon a very subtle point of how and when the master-servant dependence is sublated. He argues that the overcoming of the lord-and-servant bond happens in stoicism. As we remember from this passage,[5] the lord is free from actual existence, does not have to do with it, and his consciousness is, therefore, independent. The bondsman, on the contrary, is submerged in producing and forming things – into existence – and hence, his consciousness is reified. The problem of the lord is, however, that while his consciousness is being *for itself*, is sovereign and universal, he still needs to consume, and hence retains longing for the object world. Thereby, he needs another consciousness that

would deal with real things in order to assist him to mediate with reality; the master cannot get access to reality without the labor of the servant. His need in consumption and in the servant's labor confirms that the lord's independence of consciousness is not a true independence. Moreover, what is extremely important to remark is that, as Hegel states, in confining his contact with the world to merely consuming the thing, the master can only annihilate what he longs for and consumes. Only the servant's forming labor activity saves the object from total annihilation. Very important here is that Hegel disputes his own initial allegation that consciousness, for its formation and its generality, should be detached from reality and abstracted. Hegel first alleges abstract universality as the main trait of the master's consciousness in order to later overturn his own allegation and show that it is impossible to acquire universal consciousness in complete detachment from the material world; labor is essential in the acquisition of consciousness. But the servile labor of a servant is not enough for that. Meanwhile, the master's contact with the world through the slave's labor is not the proper case of acquiring consciousness either.

This is the reason why Hegel brings forth the Stoicist state of mind. In it, consciousness truly exceeds the master-servant confrontation. A stoic manages to sublate the split between the bondsman's submergence in the actual existence and the lord's abstracted "I." This happens because the stoicist Subject prefers not to consume at the expense of the servant, and thus rejects the position of a master. He dispenses with the servant, since the truly free consciousness is the one that is free from dependence on someone's labor for consumption, and only in the case of such liberation is the subject capable of thought, capable to uplift the activity and labor of forming to thinking (*Bildung*). Yet, as Hegel

emphasizes, despite this act of liberating the consciousness, stoicism does not answer the question of *where* the true and the virtuous is, but it generates the contentless thinking – it seeks thought in mere reasoning.[6]

Thought and thinking do not grasp the living world in this case, because despite setting the bondsman free, the stoic does not preserve the bond with the objective world, thus enhancing the split between body and mind to an even greater extent than the feudal master; the master preserved at least a minimal bond with the world at the expense of the servant's labor. As long as the free and enlightened stoic does not need the subjugated labor, all ex-servants are allowed to become *free independent citizens to exchange their labor with an ex-master on equal terms*. In this figure of a stoic, Hegel in fact gives the model of an enlightened bourgeois Subject, who benevolently declines his lordship, but is nevertheless not able to provide recognition for those who are still inferior.

Being tacitly aware of his own advantage and superiority, the stoicist ex-master provides ceremonial equality for the former servant. In this situation, inequality and inferiority are disguised by the procedures of civility and its legislation. It seems at first sight that this new combination of civic equality and tacit subordination of the inferior packaged as civility derives from the stoic's hegemony in cognition and knowledge (Bildung). But much more important in preserving his privilege is the stoic's *ataraxia* (*indifferent equanimity*) – the condition that guides the stoic in his *non-involvement* with the world. It is exactly *ataraxia* that keeps the stoic's knowledge (Bildung) appropriated for his own self, and hampers him from exerting recognition of all those who do not fit into the cognitive exigencies of Bildung. Due to appropriated, non-shared knowledge (ataraxia), the stoic maintains his tacit and

concealed masterhood. It is here that the mutation of the former feudal master and the enlightened bourgeois Subject takes place.

Thus, even when the former servant is legally acknowledged as a free citizen and works as a wage laborer, s/he does not become the subject of knowledge, judgement, and recognition for the "stoic." As long as all are equals juridically, it suffices for "the stoic" to exert their civil duty in the rhetoric of solidarity for the inferior, instead of producing any general grounds for conflating the two – the knowledge and the objective world, mind and body, superiority and inferiority. Consequently, it means that those who represent cognitive inferiority are de facto a surplus for the stoicist mind, even despite any juridical equality.

In fact, the stoicist's ataraxia subsists in the fact that, as Hegel argues, even in its detachment from the objective world, the stoic's thought is not fully exerting such withdrawal. As Hegel puts it, "This thinking consciousness as determined in the form of abstract freedom is thus only the incomplete negation of otherness. Withdrawn from existence only into itself, it has not there achieved its consummation as absolute negation of that."[7] Ataraxia implies such an equanimity and balance; neither a Marxian zeal of involvement with the wordly, nor the full Nietzschean detachment from it.

Does this position not remind us of the role of the contemporary progressive intellectual: an enlightened Subject standing for emancipation, who, having no social continuity with the unprivileged, speaks the languages of progressive citizenship, but has always been remote from any harsh social and cognitive deprivation?

Now let's look more closely at the consequences of this procedure: the inferior worker is claimed as an equal citizen, an average waged worker. But while the stoicist remains in his realm of privileged cognitive production, the inferior former servant, who is aware of the falseness of this civic rhetoric and who feels to be a surplus in relation to the subject of knowledge, simply self-employs with the neo-master, entering the illusionary heterotopia, a neo-feudal incestual “family,” a common “sincere” body of a community.

In this site of informal heterotopia, the division of labor between the host and the guest is disguised by intimacy and mateship, quite in the vein of medieval courtesy. This quasi-feudal heterotopia of “love” is as well a potential site of sado-masochist coercion, as we mentioned above; but this sado-masochist heterotopia at least saves the servant from feeling one's redundancy, which is so obvious in the context of the civic emancipatory rhetoric of “a stoicist.”

This explains why the present rupture in populist politics is not between the wealthiest and the most impoverished, but between the enlightened transnational middle class, i.e. the carriers of global knowledge, and the obscurant local masses. Moreover, the authoritarian governments and re-feudalized oligarchic clans successfully manage to set the rage of masses on enlightened “stoics,” presenting them as the global rulers despising the rabble. The “people” are thus allowed to be “spoilt” children and apply their “shit” to express their rage against their superiors.

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One of the achievements of cognitive capitalism, as it was thought until recently, was its accelerative growth and the access to general intellect for the masses. Everyone remembers Maurizio Lazzarato’s term “capitalism’s communism.” However, the algorythmization

and cybernetic updating of social services and labor, or proliferation of languages of political critique and emancipation – even when claimed as accessible – were *unrecognized* by masses as the source of their enlightenment and welfare. In other words, diverse resources of enlightenment or of cognitive growth are not only the matter of access, but as well the matter of certain social jargon, which too often remained untranslatable and hence blank for the majority of masses.

When knowledge becomes the main capital and means of production, it is inequality in knowledge that rather causes insult and the mood of non-recognition amongst the unprivileged layers of society. Such a split diagnosed the ataractic self-referentiality and platitude of the discourses of emancipation. This is something that we, the cognitive workers, didn't fully manage to realize. For the impoverished worker, it is easier to identify with the oligarch's financial wealth than with the enlightened progressive intelligentsia, even if it is socially and economically precarious**.** The unrevealed latent "master" in such a situation is precisely that very stoicist subject claiming emancipation – i.e. cognitive intelligentsia.

Hence, it is no surprise that in almost all post-socialist countries neo-liberal "democratic" governments had been overtaken by national anti-globalist and "anti-neoliberal" conservative oligarchies, which are openly supported not only by former communist organizations (often former communist party remainders), but even by certain grassroots left communities. Openly demonstrating contempt to the global cultural or academic fields, these grassroots leftist anti-globalists often regard conservative leaders, or even the heads of national oligarchies – Erdogan, Orban, Putin, Trump, Ivanishvili – as the Syriza-type resistance against global financial and cultural bureaucracy. Therefore, only a more sophisticated view of the conservative turn

would enable us to see that traditionalism and the restitution of religiosity might not be the case of utter faith or a protection of essential values. The real intention behind cultural traditionalism and regionalization is not a fight against modernity. On the contrary, it is the revolt and envy for not being apt for the enlightened and emancipated techno-contemporaneity and its lexicons.

The ataractic disregard of the cognitively illegible layers of society by progressive intelligentsia created the illusion of two models of capitalism functioning simultaneously – democratic global financial capitalism; and the resource, territorial, and autocratic one, pretending to be anti-capitalist in form, and in fact being capitalist in content. Meanwhile, both modes of capitalism are definitely the two sides of the same coin.

III

The Proletariat as the Subject of Thought and Enlightenment

Who could then be the universal subject of knowledge and consciousness that would be able to connect the abstraction of thought and the concreteness of the formation of things, i.e. the body and the mind? Historically, the Subject that would acquire the consciousness that is both general in its speculative scale, but also concrete in the application of this generality within the objective existence, was the proletariat. It was only the proletariat that was endowed by Marx with the capacity to turn labor into overall generalized knowledge and Bildung. In *The History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukacs claims that the proletariat's class consciousness is in fact the production of what consciousness has to be per se. Otherwise, the bourgeois consciousness is not yet any consciousness at all. (A similar

argument belongs to Andrey Platonov, who wrote that “the soul of the bourgeoisie is desire and sexuality,” whereas “the soul of proletariat is consciousness.”)[8]

What is striking when watching the documentary materials of the Comintern congress of 1921 is that most of those brilliant communist proponents of proletarian revolution – Lenin, Radek, Trotsky – belonged to the middle class, to the intelligentsia, to the enlightened bourgeoisie. Nonetheless, it was they who initiated an empowerment of the proletariat as the universal subject of history to then institute its after-revolutionary dictatorship. Such a disposition – that middle class, leftist cultural workers construct social continuity with the most disadvantaged working layers of society, and moreover, establish this subjugated subjectivity as the avant-garde of emancipation – would be unimaginable today. Why was it possible then and not now? Should we ascribe it to a historical moment, to the proliferation of grassroots movements then and their lack now? Is the proletariat merely a politically organized working class? Or does this concept bear something more than merely social emancipation?

The proletariat, as we remember, is the class that transcends its servile social condition by acquiring an almost fantastic stance of consciousness, in which it surpasses its own deprivation to conceptually and ontoethically posit a universal withering away of any deprivation. Meanwhile, in this acquisition of a universality of consciousness, a proletarian is not only the avant-garde of political emancipation, or a historical Subject, but a supreme philosophic Subject. It is worth mentioning in this connection that Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, which is traditionally interpreted as a dismissal of philosophy in favor of social practice, might acquire a converse meaning. This thesis might be understood, on the contrary, as a totalization of philosophy, as positing the lowest and

most disadvantaged social layers in the role of the enlightened, the philosophical – as simply making philosophy a mundane habit of each and all, rather than claiming its expulsion from social and political practice.

It is in this sense that the proletariat is not only the principal subject of deprivation, but also the principal Subject of enlightenment, mind, thought, and knowledge, embodying the most developed stage of consciousness *even before* the proletariat's nominal skills in education, technologies or productive forces could guarantee such progress. The Comintern revolutionaries, which by origin may have often been from the intelligentsia, or even the gentry, were not merely departing from defending the interests of the oppressed, or even worse, pretending to be oppressed themselves – the aberration that is often the case with today's cognitive precariat; but they posited the oppressed as the supreme Subject of knowledge and thought when generating the conceptual social construct of the proletariat – thus *practicing a radical anti-ataraxia*.

The Comintern revolutionaries consolidating with the proletariat were those post-stoics who voluntarily dismissed their cognitive hegemony in favor of another, more universal consciousness outlined in the subjectivity of the deprived laborer. What is thus *fantastic* in the notion of the proletariat is that it endows the subject of utmost deprivation with the supreme ideational power of mind *ahead* of any educational, cognitive or institutional amplification of it. This standpoint is enacted *before* Bildung among the socially deprived could be duly distributed among them, i.e. completely *prematurely*. Let's imagine that someone is claimed a philosophic Subject *before* s/he has acquired sufficient productive and institutional means, or simply skills, to confirm this position. Such an act is conditioned not by condescending assistance to

integrate the Inferior, but, on the contrary, it would engage the ethics in which it is precisely deprivation that becomes the point of departure for constructing the universal subject of knowledge, thought, and a common good. Such necessity is conditioned by the fact that for Marx only proletarian consciousness by the token of its utmost deprivation could be truly able to mirror the objectivity of being; hence it de facto could represent the most generalized, universal and socialized mode of mind. We have then a supreme subject of mind/knowledge and common good before that subject could provide a proper edification to represent its role. Yet exactly this premature act of empowering and instituting the still immature Subject of enlightenment was the paradoxical task of the October Revolution.

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[1] Svetlana Baskova is a Russian artist and film director. "The Green Elephant" – a film made in the genre of trash movie, has never been shown at a cinema or art exhibition, but it nonetheless became folklore and an Internet hit, a true people's art, distributed

at railway and Metro stations. It mirrored the most uncanny features of power distribution and primitive accumulation of the post-Soviet 1990s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnPUVxYt81M

[2] Keti Chukhrov, "Communion." Trans. K. Platt, M. Bojovic, S. Sandler. In: *Common Knowledge*, Vol 24, 2018 (1): 130–148. Duke University Press.

[3] This excerpt from the play has been translated into English from the original by Norik Badoian.

[4] http://www.mg-lj.si/en/exhibitions/1695/u3-keti-cukrov/

[5] G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford University Press, 1977. IV. The Truth of Self-Certainty. Pp.104–139.

[6] "But here the Notion cuts itself off from the multiplicity of things, and thus has no content *in its own self*, but one that is *given* to it . [...] To the question, *What* is good and true, it again gave for answer the *contentless* thought: The True and the Good shall consist in reasonableness. But this self-identity of thought is again only the pure form in which nothing is determined." Ibid. 200. P. 122.

[7]. Ibid. (201), p.122.

[8] Andrey Platonov. "But a Man as one Soul" (No Odna Dusha u Cheloveka, 1924). In: Andrey Platonov. *State Resident*. (Gosudastvenny Zitel). Moscow: Sovetsky Pisatel, 1988. P. 532.