CHILDREN OF THE ELEATIC HYDRA

TEXT BY

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1. The distinction between the sophist and the philosopher has not always been a delicate or an ambiguous matter. In the early pre-Socratic era, the sophist was identified as the one who trades wisdom with something other than wisdom. But insofar as the essence of wisdoms qua theoretical and practical know-thats cannot be exchanged with barter or money, the sophist supplies them in a form that can indeed be sold. This is the sophist as the feigner of wisdom. He replaces the know-thats of wisdom with the know-hows of the technique—the arts of rhetoric, oration and rationalization—which once mastered can be utilized toward attaining any goal irrespective of it being justified on the basis of wisdoms or not. What permits the sophist to accomplish this feat of forgery is the assumption that what is said is actually is. In other words, sayings are equal to that which is (to on). Hence, words once coupled with deductive reasoning provide a true account of the generic being (i.e. what is). To this effect, the technique provided by the sophist, the deductive art of sayings, is sufficient to engage with any domain that lays claim to the sovereign knowledge of particular instances of being or what is, be it politics, science, art or philosophy. One who obtains the technique of the sophist then is able to not only foray into all domains of thought and practice but also scrutinize them for contradictions and falsities. From this standpoint, the sophist is the hunter of falsities. By virtue of the assumed representational correspondence between what is deductively said and what actually is, all it takes for the sophist to discriminate truth from falsity is bringing the latter into contradictions or absurdities via the power of deductive arguments and the skill of words, and in doing that exposing it as that which is not (to mê on) or non-being. In this sense, what ultimately makes a sophist sophist is the ignorance of what makes him a sophist, that is, not knowing that what is said (word) is not the same as what is (being). It is no secret that the establishment of the Greek model of democracy was due to the widespread and successful practice of sophists themselves as well as their political clients. Once democracy is justified without knowing that what exactly is in democracy that merits justification, it becomes the very idea against which it has been justified. This is a picture of democracy of which Socrates was unfailingly critical and suspicious. Today's western model of democracy is but the ripened fruit of the sophist's art of democracy: the dogma of safeguarding all sayings to the extent that they are all real. Emptied of its know-thats (the knowledge of what it is and what it ought to be, what warrants its intelligibility and what it ought to do in order to maintain its intelligibility), democracy justifies itself as an end that demands no justification, for it is an empirical fact of reality foreclosed to the continuous labor of justification. Having being reified as an end-it-itself rather than as a means—a necessary but nevertheless basic and insufficient condition—for collective emancipation, democracy transmogrifies into an organ of accelerated cognitive recession and collective enfeeblement.

2. It is only with the rise of the Eleatic school of philosophy that the distinction between the sophist and the philosopher becomes an exceedingly precarious one. What connects Parmenides, Melissus and Zeno of Elea is not as much their doctrines as it is a series of enigmas or puzzles founded on a principle which they all have in common: What pertains to being (the reality of that which is) cannot be tackled with thought unless thought subordinates itself in one way or another to being (or what is), acknowledging itself no longer as distinguished from being, but as that which cannot and should not be separated from the generic, being or that which is. Failing to do so, in solving these problems, rational thought gives rise to more problems, each more entangled than the previous one—hence, the appellation 'Eleatic Hydra' as a problem that cannot be tackled by the philosopher unless the philosopher recognizes that what distinguishes her, namely, thought as differentiated from being, is an illusion of that which is not (non-being). The only viable mode of engagement with the Eleatic hydra is to think as if thought and being are one, that in every and each instance thought is an articulation of what is (whether that which is is characterized as mobility, fixity, nature, life or in today's lexicon of materialism, force, drive, body, empirical law, contingency or capital). It is this figure of Hydra that the Eleatic stranger in Plato's Sophist distills and ventriloquizes. The Eleatic stranger is a sophist who also happens to be a sophist hunter, he is proficient in dialectics, rational argumentation, and is capable of exercising the Socratic method to a devastating effect. In short, he is the doppelgänger of the Socrates, the archetype of the philosopher. The Eleatic stranger is not a sophist to the extent that he knows that being is not the same as saying, yet he is a sophist since for him thinking is being to the extent that being is all there is: the non-being of thought is predicated on that which it negates or separates itself from, which is to say, the reality of that which is or being. In other words, thought cannot be distinguished from being, for the latter is what thought ultimately is, the material conditions that constitute it. It is only Plato—not as Plato of Platonism but the real Plato whose avatar is the Socrates of the dialogues—that distinguishes the Eleatic stranger as a sophist. The constitutive gesture of sophism that the Eleatic radicalizes is not the equivocation between saying (language) and being, but eliding the distinction between thought and being, the formal specificity of the former and the substantive genericity of the latter. Ultimately, the Eleatic stranger is a sophist insofar as his knowledge of thought as being is precisely the outcome of his ignorance or lack of knowledge that non-being of thought is not predicated on that which it negates, namely, being, since the former's negativity (non-being) is a formal not a substantive negativity that can be said to be conditioned by that which is or being.

3. If the negativity of thought (that which is not) as the warrant of its distinction from being (that which is) is collapsed into a substantive distinction rather than a formal one, then thinking is reduced to that which is (forces, drives, matter, bodies, mobility, capital, natural law, biological evolution, etc.) The rational critique then can only become critical when it is staged as an exposé—a reductio ad absurdum—of reason or thought's materialist conditions that at once make it possible and pervert it. In short, in this scenario, thought can only underline its significance and the critique can only become critical, when they celebrate their impotency. This is the moment that what passes today as critical theory hails as its greatest achievement: the systematic corroboration of its own material turpitude and debilitation. The critique then falls under the jurisdiction of what Hegel calls abstract negation and unconscious self-deception—that is, the complete disillusionment about the materialist traps of history which is but a hallmark of naivety and a path to despair. Reasons which form and adjudicate recognitions, obligations, responsibilities and imports (what matters and what does not) are replaced with a critical discourse on the irrationality of causes in a broadest natural and socio-cultural sense. The critical discourse becomes an exposé on how causes not only semantically distort reasons but also masquerade themselves as reasons. But dispensing with the conceptual and normative resources of reason in order to expose their causal irrationality and diagnose pathologies by reasonless appraisal of causes amounts to the impoverishment of semantic requirements necessary for the intelligibility of diagnosis. In other words, the unconscious undermining of the criteria required for the adequate consciousness of the rational self occasions a consciousness which is inadequate to have a proper conception of itself in the world and determinately transform itself in accordance with such a conception. The inadequate consciousness unconsciously justifies those pathologies of history it is bent on eradicating. But this collapse of thought and being whether in the name of the generic, the one or materialism that leads to an allegedly emancipative disenchantment of thought and reason by their constitutive material conditions is, as Plato recognizes, the very gesture of sophism that today is preserved by both the left and the right, Marxists and Capitalists, by the critical posturing after the Frankfurt school in the name of theory and by the neoliberal cult of the capital in the name of facts. To challenge the Eleatic hydra, Plato does not confront its heads or pseudo-problems that arise from the position of irreduction (the sham emancipative gesture that thought and being, reason and matter, logic and force are already one), but rather eviscerates its body, which is to say, he abolishes the substantive distinction between thought and being as a false distinction. The separation of thought from being is a formal negativity, rather than a substantive one. The Eleatic sublimates the sophist into a philosopher, into a champion of the critique by turning the formal negativity of thought into a substantive negativity that is in each and every instance determined by that which is i.e. material conditions which at once condition and distort thought. Depending on what we interpret that which is, from the Eleatic perspective, thought or the critique cannot emancipate itself unless it reduces itself to the materialist language of that which is (the one, the substantive fixity, the substantive mobility, absolute contingency, the capital, the force, natural evolution, the neoliberal status quo). Having lost its formal negativity—what demarcates the distinction between reasons and causes—thought's normative-prescriptive capacities begin to atrophy. Every ought (as in what we ought to do) is subordinated to the order of is in the last instance. In other words, critical thought cannot emancipate itself from its material conditions (the violence of force, drives, capital, etc.) unless it resorts to the very material conditions that are simultaneously the cause and the solution of its problems. Emancipation from the violence of material conditions then is claimed to be impossible without capitulation to those very conditions albeit in a different guise. But as Plato recognizes the emancipation of theoretical and practical cognitions can only start with an investigation into the formal negativity of thought, what it consists in and how it can be mobilized and sharpened. Such an investigation to the non-being of thought can only begin by fleshing out the systematic connections between thought, saying and knowing—that is, logics in the broadest possible sense, language and episteme. It is only through this formal negativity—as the condition of the intelligibility of thinking, saying and knowing—that the coherence of realism and materialism can be preserved and accentuated.

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4. Without ceasing to be a Platonist, in Covenant Transport, Beech resurrects the sophistic hydra in its new form in order to destroy it in the fashion of Plato but not until sufficiently shedding light on the fiend. Imagine if the Eleatic hydra had survived—by performing a perfect mimicry of the philosopher—if it had gone through the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, the industrial age, the tragedies of the twentieth century, the rise of the neoliberalism, if it had been acquainted with empirical laws, laws of gravity, materialist interpretation of being, the localist rebellions against the status quo of is throughout ages, from the rise of the protestant secularism to punk, if it had learned the secrets of rational choice theory, critical theory, communitarian politics, and the libertarian doctrines of exit. The chattering avatars of Covenant Transport are precisely the descendants of the Eleatic Hydra, now transubstantiated into the cult of the neoliberal sophistication of capitalism. For them, that which is is now the place, the centripetal force of the capitalist system. Like Eleatics, they are disillusioned by the traps of the old form of sophism. They no longer treat capitalism as an inescapable theological or teleological destiny. For them capitalism is neither a manifest capitalist realism (i.e. the belief that there is no alternative to capitalism for capitalism is really that which ultimately is) nor an ineffable thing since they are cognizant of the fact that capitalism is constrained just as any real system by causal laws, by mechanisms and material conditions. Nor do they believe that theory can casually exercise emancipation because reality is an unconstrained theory or that sayings mirror reality. The children of Eleatic hydra are disabused by the gestures of sophism, old and new. Yet insofar as for them thought is but being—now construed as a mere material condition, a natural or social causal force masquerading itself as reason—in order to escape the gravitational pull of the system, the capitalist place that distorts thought, they ought to mimic the material logic of non-place and pure mobility. In other words, their prescription for emancipation from the tyranny of the place which is at once afforded and ensnared by the gravity of the global capitalism is to reinvent thought in terms of a new material condition that opposes the old one: the non-place, pure mobility, a flux perpetually resisting capture. But by conceiving the thought of emancipation not as the emancipation of thought as that which is formally distinct from its material conditions, but in fact by reformulating thought and its normative vocations in terms of its material conditions, their gesture of emancipation simply repeats the material conditions from which they seek to escape. Thus what they take as an emancipative solution neither consequentially changes nor abandons the material conditions from which they suppose to change or break away. To resist the gravity of the capital as that which conditions and distorts thought, they do not reclaim the formal autonomy of thought but instead reduce thought into a new material condition—force and mobility—which is now championed against what they take to be an oppressive set of material conditions. They fight oppression of material conditions over thought with the capitulation of thought to a revamped set of material conditions. In doing so, they never break from that which is, but reiterate it in a different guise. And what is this new guise of that which is if not the more subtle reality of capitalism as a system of distributions, mobilities, fluxes and myths of freedom from the constraints of laws (natural or social) upon which its more discernible manifestation as the system of sedentarization, local gravitational pull and confinement is erected. But as Beech emphasizes, destroying the children of the Eleatic hydra is less a matter of revealing its nature, as it is a matter of drawing an alternative to the material conditions within which the hydra is at once imprisoned and bolstered. Outlining such an alternative would require, first of all, acknowledging the negativity of thought as the necessary condition of the critique. To acknowledge this negativity is to articulate the formal sociolinguistic conditions of thought so as to make explicit what is already implicit in our conceptual practices. Formally distinguishing and separating the oughts of thought from the is of its material conditions is a precondition for knowing, particularly the practical knowledge of what it is we ought to do on the basis of the theoretical knowledge of what the condition is. Without distinguishing the formal autonomy of thought, we neither know the constraints of material conditions upon thought nor how to work within such constraints in order to effect a consequential change. Salvaging the non-being of thought is to highlight what things ought to be not in virtue of how things are but in spite of them. But to do what ought to be done is to know that exactly which material conditions constrain theoretical and practical thoughts, and knowing how to modify or replace negative constraints and build upon the positive ones. Having fortified this recipe for thinking an alternative, cognitively chained to the appearance of capitalism's manifest form, buoyed by the myth of perpetual motion, the children of the Eleatic hydra are cursed—by their own illusion of materialist disillusionment—to stalk the earth forever as the molecular revolutionaries of the subtlest form of capital.