

**Nenad Mišćević**

University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts, Slomškovo trg 15, SI-2000 Maribor  
vismiscevic@ceu.hu

**Abolishing Philosophy**

**Abstract**

*The paper explores the Continental End-of-philosophy Thesis according to which philosophers should abandon the traditional philosophical reflection in favor of participating in more concrete theoretical-cultural practices, possibly marked by strong political engagement. It offers a historical-interpretative genealogy of the Thesis. The most unpredictable development in its history came with the fusion of the two streams: the politicized idea of abolishment of philosophy became coupled with the poetic thinking line, and the newly formed couple achieved a spectacularly high status, undergoing several transformations as a sequel. The final form of the Thesis stresses the participation in politically relevant cultural-artistic practices as the ultimate destination of philosophy. The paper suggests that this interesting route has ended in a quite disastrous result, an appeal to abolish philosophy in a dispersed array of politico-cultural practices, many of which quite ephemeral. The historical part explains the result and places it in wider context.*

**Keywords**

continental philosophy, end-of-philosophy, abolishing philosophy, politico-cultural practices

What is the future of philosophy, asks the title of the conference.<sup>1</sup> Here I would like critically to explore one particular answer, namely the one popular in Continental tradition in last century and a half: philosophy has to abolish-transform itself into a more politicized practice, and according to a more recent reading, preferably a cultural one. The original term is ‘aufheben’, to abolish, preserve and elevate. I shall argue that the answer is a bad one, and will trace its genealogy.

Let me start by noting that the general idea that philosophy could and even should transform itself into something else is old, common, and understandable. After all, philosophy is in touch with all sorts of practices, and, to put it in a spatial metaphor, surrounded by a lot of areas: from politics and law, through history, art, and religion, to mathematics and science. When you do philosophy of art you are supposed to be well-versed in art/and or art history, and the same holds for doing philosophy of mathematics and philosophy of law. There is a constant temptation of overstepping and then either succeeding as art historian, theoretician of law, or of mathematics, or drowning in the alien medium, after having abandoned one’s native ground. Historically, matters were different in different times with different domains. Typically,

1

Thanks go to the organizers of the Cres conference for inviting me, and to Lino Veljak, Ivana Zagorac, and Ana Smokrović, for discussion and support. We all found the island,

the *Cres Extensa*, wonderful; I hope that our talks contributed to the status of *Cres Cogitans* in a positive way.

various branches of science have been evolving either from what we would call philosophical interests (Aristotelian physics did contribute to the birth of the actual physics, though in a tortuous way), or in very close contact with philosophy (as is the case with Greek mathematics, from Pythagoras to the mathematicians, members of Plato's Academy and Lyceum, as Eudemus of Rhodes noted in his first sketch of history of mathematics ever written). In early modern times this proximity was signaled terminologically in calling natural science "Philosophia naturalis". But the kind of overspill that comes close to abolishment of philosophy in science has not been prominent until the early twentieth century. Things have stood differently with religion and theology; here there was a strong tendency, from at least Augustine on, to see the worldly wisdom of philosophers as a stepping stone to a more substantial divinely inspired variant of wisdom. Philosophy was constantly overstepping into theology, whose servant maid it has even officially become.

Turning to the last century and a half (plus a decade or two), to the more worldly interests, and to what will become Continental tradition, the talk of "abolishing" or replacing philosophy has been becoming more and more common. You cannot abolish [*aufheben*] philosophy without making it a reality, writes Marx famously in his "Introduction" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. He follows the lead of Hegel, implicitly appealing to the double meaning of the German word 'aufheben': not only will philosophy become real (and thus "abolish" itself in politics), but the political reality will become philosophical, so its main aspiration will be fulfilled. But even before the *Contribution*, Marx has famously hit upon an ingenious simile:

"Themistocles, when Athens was threatened with destruction, tried to persuade the Athenians to abandon the city entirely and found a new Athens at sea, in another element." (Easton, Guddat 1997: 53)

Like Themistocles, the present day thinker should, in Marx's view, suggest that philosophy abandons its traditional element of pure thought, and build its "new Athens" elsewhere; in the medium of social and political practice. Other philosophers will propose different media as candidate new elements; we shall use Marx's metaphor as the guiding picture in what follows.

The idea of abolishing philosophy has generated an important and interesting historical and topical development within Continental tradition; it has not been discussed in sufficient generality. My generation went through a part of it in exciting and interesting ways. However, before embarking upon a reconstruction, I want briefly to mention the analytic temptation, making philosophy into *ancilla scientiae*. It appeared with Carnap and Vienna Circle, and their anti-metaphysical bend. In the works of the most zealous anti-metaphysicians philosophy threatened to disappear in logical formalism. Another outgrowth, partly critical, partly along related lines has been Quinean naturalism. In Quine's original formulation, philosophy should be "continuous" with science; the thesis that I personally find quite acceptable. In the further development up to present-day naturalism the abolishment of philosophy practically disappeared as a topic, although some philosophers, like Stephen Stich and the generation of "experimental philosophers" come close to reviving it.<sup>2</sup> Authors like Stephen Stich and Paul Churchland have dedicated their philosophical carrier to the task of criticizing the standard analytic philosophy, moving even closer towards science, mainly cognitive science and neuroscience. Of course, while criticizing philosophy one remains philosopher with a charming

negative, critical pathos to boot. But the next generation, if it takes the advice of its teachers seriously just merges with scientists. Philosophy disappears as a discipline. The recent debates about “experimental philosophy” bear witness to the seduction. In short, on the analytic side, the Vienna Circle tradition of “abolishing metaphysics” offered some pluses: a focus on rationality and argumentation, interest in finding out how things are, and reliance on science, and opened some traps, threatening the disappearance of philosophy. As luck would have had it, the traps were avoided. So much about the analytic side. Back to the main issue.

We shall be taking a look from the present-day situation of the unfortunate Continental–Analytic split. Analytic philosophy had its moment of enthusiasm for “abolishment”, of course in the direction of science and logical reconstruction of scientific theories; the enthusiasm has later taken more moderate forms of naturalism in philosophy, and these days “experimental philosophy”. I will not spend much time on this; my focus will be on the central development in Continental philosophy. I want to look at the development of the idea of overstepping into a different medium, from Marx (and Marxist) favoring of politics, Heidegger’s of poetic thinking, Derrida’s of *écriture* – poetic vanguard semi-philosophical writing with artistic pretensions, up to Rorty’s proposal of cultural politics, with continuation in film studies, gender studies, race studies and so on. I propose that the *Continental End-of-philosophy Thesis* claims the following:

*Philosophers should abandon the traditional philosophical reflection in favor of participating in more concrete theoretical-cultural practices, possibly marked by strong political engagement.*

As Rorty puts it, we should view philosophy as a transitional genre (2007: Chapter six, *passim*). Not all Continental philosophers followed the idea: Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Ricœur, and Habermas are the best known among those who did not. But many did, and the idea also gained enormous popularity outside philosophical circles. I shall be proposing two ideas. The first is historical-interpretative, and it concerns the genealogy of the *Continental End-of-philosophy Thesis*: the path to its present form has been tortuous, and probably unpredictable from the standpoint of its beginning. The *Thesis* started in the hyper-politicized young Hegelians’ reflection on Hegel’s idea of the end of philosophy (and history), and stayed bound to this context for almost a century. With Heidegger a completely new beginning was made in the mid-twentieth century: the end of philosophy-as-metaphysics prompted the idea of a very different kind of abolishment, in which philosophy spills over into poetic thinking and dwelling. The most unpredictable development came with the fusion of the two streams: the politicized idea of abolishment of philosophy became coupled with the poetic thinking line, and the newly formed couple achieved a spectacularly high status, undergoing several transformations as a sequel. The final form of the *Thesis* stresses the participation in politically relevant (or at least strongly politicized) cultural-artistic practices as the ultimate destination of philosophy. The tortuous route to the final form is to a large extent due to historical contingencies and other combinations could have been made.

2

See the interesting discussion by Chris Daly and David Liggins of what they call ‘deferralism’ (to science) in their 2011 paper.

The second idea is more evaluative: it looks to me that this interesting route has ended in a quite disastrous result. Abolishing philosophy in a dispersed array of politico-cultural practices, many of which quite ephemeral, is not an attractive intellectual goal. Let me illustrate the confusion that resulted from all these confluences, by one example, very popular on the present-day Continental scene. More than half a century ago, Jacques Lacan came up with the following idea: in our everyday life we are trapped in systematic illusion having to do with our narcissistic projections – the mirror structure of our consciousness. The reality, especially the deep reality of our real, unconscious life is not only opaque to us, but, if confronted with it, we would find it impossible (“It can’t be that I want to sleep with my mother”, and so on). He found a fine, pithy formulation, with the modals capitalized: “*The Real is the Impossible*”. His intent was clearly that the reader should take it with a grain of salt: “The real is what seems impossible to us, naïve (self-)observers.” But the epistemic reading was never made explicit. Then someone came up with the story that in ‘68 there was graffiti urging the reader: “Let us be realists and demand the impossible!”, and the graffiti was connected to Lacan’s dictum. The combination became fashionable, and soon various authors were writing about the political aspect of the alleged “reality of the impossible”. So, some two decades later Baudrillard commented on the September 11<sup>th</sup> by saying that the event was in fact impossible, and then became real, and another French author, then director of a prestigious institute for philosophy in Paris, wrote seriously that September 11<sup>th</sup> has changed the status of modalities as such. Žižek appeals to the dictum in a lot of his writings, most often in a politicized context.

One can see the path traversed: an authoritative author starts with paradoxical sounding claim, of a certain literary aura, expecting the reader to use her grain of salt, and interpret the main expression (“impossible”) in an attenuated (epistemic) way. The claim gets a political reading, still compatible with the strong literary (modal) and the attenuated (epistemic) understanding. Since the strong literary reading sounds more provocative, and therefore more politically engaged, it exercises stronger attraction. In an atmosphere of argument and analysis the teachers would warn student from the literary reading, and point to the fact that the original author (Lacan, in this case) himself built his theory upon the attenuated reading (the psychoanalyst sees what is allegedly impossible as being actual-real, and it is only the naïve subject who does not). In the atmosphere of artistic-political understanding of (post-)philosophy the worst possible reading becomes most popular and finally central. The philosophy is abolished in a politicized literary practice.

### **Seeing philosophy as a transitional genre – two sources and two stages**

#### ***Marx: moving to the political***

The idea of the end of philosophy has been seducing philosophers at least since Hegel. His triumphant claim that philosophy has ended, reached its perfection, indeed, in his own work, was inspiration and provocation for generations to come. But let me say a few words about the Hegelian framework, that enabled the particular transition to the idea of *Aufhebung* in politics. The main feature of the framework is Hegel’s famous proposal to view the actual human history as an unfolding of the deep ground of reality, *Geist*. The nature of this ground is historical, and actual historical events are part and parcel of the

deepest ontological development of the *Geist*. The new idea is that the basic structure of being itself is historical. History is the medium of fundamental ontology. Subject (mind) and the external world do not stand in a basically static, structural relation; their relations change with history. And the history is at the same time cultural, political and spiritual. *The deep ontology of the world changes with historical events*; to mention the event favored by Kojève, one of the most successful interpreters and popularizers of Hegel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the success of Napoleon changes, so to speak, the very ontological structure of the world. Of course, such events are not contingent, they are part of the deep history of Spirit, and its journey to itself.

Let me illustrate the claim with a few very famous passages from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, taken from the very beginning and very end each. In well-known opening section of the "Preface", Hegel first talk about "the true shape in which truth exists" (1999: 3), namely "the scientific system of such truth". He speaks of his goal of bringing "philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title 'love of knowing' and be actual knowing" (Hegel 1999: 3). Then he passes to an implicit criticisms of those who would replace knowledge of the Whole with feeling or intuition, and continues with criticizing their demand:

"If we apprehend a demand of this kind in its broader context, and view it as it appears at the stage which self-conscious Spirit has presently reached, it is clear that Spirit has now got beyond the substantial life it formerly led in the element of thought, that it is beyond the immediacy of faith, beyond the satisfaction and security of the certainty that consciousness then had, of its reconciliation with the essential being, and of that being's universal presence both within and without." (Hegel 1999: 4)

A naïve reader might think at this point that Hegel is talking metaphorically of the spirit of time, or of some framework for thought, not of the deep reality itself.<sup>3</sup> What follows will free him from his naiveté:

"Besides, it is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation." (Hegel 1999: 6)

The radical character of the thesis is clear if we consider a pre-Hegelian metaphysics or indeed the classical Aristotelian, or materialistic, or Spinozistic, or Berkleyan, or Kantian idealistic ones, and contrast it with the view proposed. Imagine a mainstream physicalist arguing that the fundamental structure of space-time plus fundamental forces has drastically changed with September 11<sup>th</sup>, given the dramatic character of the US response to it. And that with the advent of the first Afro-American president of the US the space-time has

3

What does an analytically trained Hegelian do when confronted with such claims? Robert Stern, in his Routledge *Guidebook* wisely chooses to stress the understandable and acceptable. For him, Hegel is here talking just about the way people of his time react to new insights: "Hegel declares that thankfully the period of such irrationalism has passed, and that 'ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era' (PS: 6). However, he also states that when it first appears on the scene, this renewed commitment to reason is flawed by a certain intellectual immaturity, as this new way of thinking is 'no more a complete actuality than is a new-born child

(...)" (Stern 2002: 31) He does not mention that ours is supposed to be a period of transition of the Spirit itself to a new era; it is more spirit-of-time than the Absolut Spirit that is discussed here, and this is perhaps the best way to introduce the book to contemporary English-speaking reader. Kenneth Wesphal talks about Hegel's collective or social epistemology, without ever mentioning that the ultimate bearer of knowledge and self-consciousness is the Absolute itself (or Himself) (Wesphal 2003).

suffered another transformation. Or, imagine an Aristotelian metaphysician arguing that the very nature of four causes has undergone a dramatic change with the death of Alexander the Great (or Richard Nixon, if you prefer the later). Hegel's move is a dramatic and spectacular announcement of a radical alternative to these ways of thinking, the start of a geological rift of spectacular dimension. Let me encapsulate this revolutionary, rifting idea as a principle linking the anthropological, historical and the deeply ontological, as *Anthropo-historico ontological (AHO) principle*:

(AHO): *The anthropological and historical is deeply ontological.*

With the acceptance of this principle history is seen as permeating ontology; in some version the former replaces the later. It is important to note how dramatic the move of accepting the AHO principle and taking it as fundamental in one's philosophy is. The move is unthinkable for early modern philosophers; but even the Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment authors, from Condorcet and Voltaire to Rousseau and Burke, who were obsessed by history, both political and cultural, did not dream of it.

Be it as it may, the history of philosophy, and thereby the history of *Geist*, the Absolute itself, has ended in Hegel's times. No, the next generation says, the philosophy has perhaps ended, but history goes on, and this recent history is as philosophically relevant as were the great events of the former generation's time. AHO holds for the revolutions in the forties (with 1848 as the peak), as it had held for the times of French revolution and Napoleonic wars. So, the end of history is still ahead after some successful revolution, and building up of future society. What about philosophy? What will happen to philosophy?

Marx and some of his followers offered an exciting proposal, namely that it should be overcome. Why? Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it, as the eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach famously has it. (Other followers preferred some version of "scientific Marxism", but their story is not relevant to us here.) But even before the *Contribution*, Marx has famously hit upon the ingenious simile with Themistocles we already mentioned. Like Themistocles, the present day thinker should suggest that philosophy abandons its traditional element of pure thought, and build its "new Athens" elsewhere; for Marx, in the medium of social and political practice. Other philosophers will propose different media as candidate new elements; we shall use Marx's metaphor as the guiding picture in what follows. In this project, former philosophy surpasses itself and merges with revolution: philosophers themselves start changing the world. One may guess that the project will infuse philosophy with pathos, and move it away from cold argumentative style into literary style coupled with political purpose. Perhaps, the best authors, say thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno, will combine aphoristic, literary style, full of irony and allusions, with a rational scaffolding.<sup>4</sup> But on the average, the effect might be one of moving from treatises to manifestos, with predictable bad consequences.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Heidegger: turning to poetry***

Marx has thus famously proposed to turn philosophy (in)to politics. However, there was a second line in waiting, poetic and artistic, of the same weight and importance. One can probably trace its lineage in the German speaking world to romantics like Schlegel, but it appears most clearly in the aftermath of Hegel with the work of Kierkegaard. In his book on *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy* (1994) Michael Weston notes the following:

“Post-metaphysical thought in Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida shows certain central characteristics which have their parallels in Kierkegaard: a ‘style’ of writing at variance with that of the metaphysical tradition which has its rationale in the ‘situatedness’ of the thought whose intention is, not the representation of ‘the truth’, but an ‘intervention’ into that situation.” (Weston 1994: 136)

His examples are very well chosen: Nietzsche’s use of aphorisms, stories, poems, the fictional character of Zarathustra, Heidegger’s “etymologies” and “poetic” thinking, Derrida’s “double-reading” (Weston 1994: 136). He notes that all this continued and strengthened today in some of the mainstream continental work, in cultural studies, continental feminist philosophy. Why are these non-argumentative moves important for the thinkers mentioned? In his judgment these “are strategies of writing demanded by the essentially ‘situated’ character of their thought” (Weston 1994: 136).

Kierkegaard, as well as Nietzsche, did not enter the center of academic philosophy in their own time. It was Heidegger who succeeded to procure the central place to the line we are talking about. Most importantly for us, he chose to connect the admiration of literature and literary style with the issue of the end of philosophy. His 1964 essay “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” has it that philosophy is metaphysics, and “metaphysics thinks being as being in the manner of representational thinking which gives reasons” (Heidegger 1973: 55). Giving reasons is bad, so the end of philosophy, Heidegger goes on to say, is “the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technological world”.<sup>6</sup> Heidegger’s alternative is “thinking”, open to what determines it, namely Being itself. It can be viewed as a replay of the previous development, but with important contrasts: the praxis is not the solution. Here is a quote from “Overcoming Metaphysics”:

“No mere action will change the world, because Being as effectiveness and effecting closes all beings off in the face of Appropriation. Even the immense suffering which surrounds the earth is unable to waken a transformation, because it is only experiences as suffering, as passive, and thus as the opposite state of action, and thus.” (Heidegger 1973: 110)<sup>7</sup>

So, we have the end of metaphysics (the topic of *Ende der Philosophie*) plus the solution: poetic writing, the “poetical building” is to replace philosophy as we knew it. Instead of *Aufhebung* in politics, we have *Aufhebung* in poetic language. Take the following example. The English version of the *End of Philosophy* begins strictly with metaphysical issues: Leibniz, substance, and the

4

Consider the following formulation from Foucault’s reading of Kant. He talks about philosophical ethos and says: “1. This philosophical ethos may be characterized as a limit-attitude. (...) The point in brief is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression” (Rabinow 1984: 65). Marxists were obviously not the only ones who sought to abolish philosophy in revolutionary activity.

5

Here is an illustration of effects on strong politization on authors that pretend to be guided by rational considerations; Alain Badiou, who has a mathematical background and knows how to argue about mathematics, develops ontology of what he calls ‘event’. The reader

expects a general metaphysics; instead, it turns out that ‘event’ means historical-political event. Worse, only happenings that are considered politically important by Badiou count as ‘events’, so his presumed ‘ontology’ ends up as an extremely politicized enterprise, with no independent philosophical criteria to help us decide about its main issues.

6

See the fine analysis in: Hodge 1995: 148 ff; Bourgeois 2001.

7

In German (1954): “Keine bloße Aktion wird den Weltzustand ändern, weil das Sein als Wirksamkeit und Wirken alles Seiende gegenüber dem Ereignis verschließt.”

like. But Heidegger asked that it be supplemented with his lecture “Overcoming Metaphysics” which ends in the following way:

“No transformation comes without an anticipatory escort. But how does an escort draw near unless Appropriation opens out which, calling, needing, envisions human being, that is sees and in this seeing brings mortals to the path of thinking, poetizing building.” (Heidegger 1973: 110)<sup>8</sup>

In short, the path of philosophy is to transform itself into a path of building that is at the same time thinking and poetic, a “Weg des denkenden, dichtenden Bauens”. Of course, part of the transformation of philosophy will proceed through very literature-inspired re-interpretation of the classics. In the sixties philosophers thus had at their disposal two lines of the abolishment-project, the political and the poetic one, the first stemming from early Marx, the second from late Heidegger. My generation starting its studies in Croatia or Slovenia became familiar with both: the Praxis school (and Božidar Debenjak) were closer to the first, teachers like Danilo Pejović and, to some extent, Vanja Sutlić (and Dušan Pirjevec in Slovenia) to the second.

### Coming together

With the generation of philosophers who sought their inspiration in Heidegger’s later thought, the two lines quickly came together. A new profile emerged: one of politically engaged thinker who is at the same time prone to poetry and to writing inspired by literary genres. While the German tradition was extolling Hölderlin, and the Ancient Greek poets, the French has turned to the beginnings of the national vanguard literature, with Mallarmé and Lautreamont, and to later writers like Artaud. The important, if not the main role was played by these French thinkers, partly inspired by Heidegger, partly by structuralism, and their post-structuralists ideas have then spread over into the English speaking areas. The literary pole is described by them, primarily by Derrida, as *écriture*, a very rich term deserving a paper of its own; it brings together the basic meaning of “writing” with strong associations of literary production. If philosophy is to be *écriture*, it better models itself on the great vanguard poetry. Let me just quote a summary from Lucy’s *A Derrida Dictionary*:

“In what is called literature, we might say that writing draws attention to itself at the level of the signifier. We might say in turn that writing as literature has appropriated or been allowed to own this attention to the signifier as its special property or proper object, the better that other forms of writing may define themselves against such attention. Certainly in the case of philosophical writing, an attention to the signifier is not a priority. On the contrary, the basic rule of philosophical writing is to make the signifier as transparent as possible, its only function being to focus attention on the signified (albeit Nietzsche is a notable exception here). But as Derrida points out consistently, the distinction between literature and other kinds of writing serves a sort of dream – the dream of what might be called the possibility of a form of writing that operates at the level of ‘degree zero’ representation.” (Lucy 2004: 157)

The original sin of philosophy is then the following: “philosophy suppresses everything in writing that literature exploits” (Lucy 2004: 157). No wonder that philosophy as we know it should be surpassed in a quasi-literary writing, exemplified by works like *The Postcard*. Here is Derrida, bringing together Marx’s line on philosophy and the other, transformation-through-writing-(and interpreting) line:

“This dimension of performative interpretation, that is, of an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets, will play an indispensable role in what I would like to say this evening. ‘An interpretation that transforms what it interprets’ is a definition of the performative as unorthodox with regard to speech act theory as it is with regard to the 11<sup>th</sup> Thesis on Feuerbach (‘The



philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.’)” (Derrida 1994: 63)

Interpretation is performative, and hereby transformative. It accomplishes on the piece of paper the work that Marx thought is to be accomplished on the barricades: changing the world and abolishing philosophy. And the performative re-interpretation will be guided largely by literary models. Examples are easy to find. Let me give one illustration, Derrida’s discussion of gift (1992). He starts with a short story by Baudelaire, and his first move is building up a paradox: a gift is a gift only if it is given without any expectations of return (not only in material terms, but also in terms of gratitude, and the like). If G is to be a gift, there must not be expectations of reciprocity, exchange, countergift at any future time, i.e. if A expects countergift from B, then G is not a gift. It is impossible to give without expecting some positive reaction, so the only way for giving to be authentic is through forgetting that one has given a gift. You see, giving is deeply paradoxical. Then, he generalizes: Many crucially important social practices rest on (social demands of) gifts. Therefore, many crucially important social practices are almost impossible (and philosophically deeply problematic). Now comes the surprise: some central philosophical topics and doctrines are articulated in terms of gift and giving, so these topics are deeply problematic.

He first interprets the traditional idea of “givens” in perception. He never mentions that “giving” in these contexts has little to do with gift. Any rational discussion of the topic would focus on the difference; Derrida proceeds as if sense-data are supposed to be gifts! Then he turns to Heidegger. Heidegger plays on the ambiguity of German “es gibt” which means both “there is” and “it gives”. The etymological meaning “it gives” will be given prominence. Heidegger then suggests that “giving” explains the “is”. Being is there as something that gives, or is given, and the time joins in: it gives and is given. Starting with ontological categories of Being and time, assumed to be easily anthropomorphized, Heidegger applies anthropocentric metaphors to them. The result is a much more anthropo-morphic and -centric picture of basic ontology. The Being is something that gives, and/or is given, the way humans give, and the way items are given in human social and historical interaction. Derrida now does the hermeneutic work. First, he enforces the figure of giving: what is given is a gift. Note that “giving” can be interpreted in a merely mildly anthropomorphic manner, as in many standing phrases: “X has given way to Y” does not mean that X literally offered a thing, namely way, to Y. “Given the circumstances” does not mean that someone has given circumstances to the speaker.

So with “gift” the anthropo-morphic plot is enforced. “Giving” and “given” is not a mere turn of speech; no, the Being is the gift, paradoxically, the gift of itself to someone or something (presumably to Dasein). By stressing “gift” Derrida performs the second circle. The picture of giving prompts in his case some new figurative work which then results in a more anthropo-morphic and -centric picture, with stronger effects of the same kind.

It is already clear at this point that an argumentative discussion on this topic is almost impossible. Imagine asking: “What reasons do we have to think of Being as a gift?”, or claiming that we have none. It is like arguing with a romantic

8

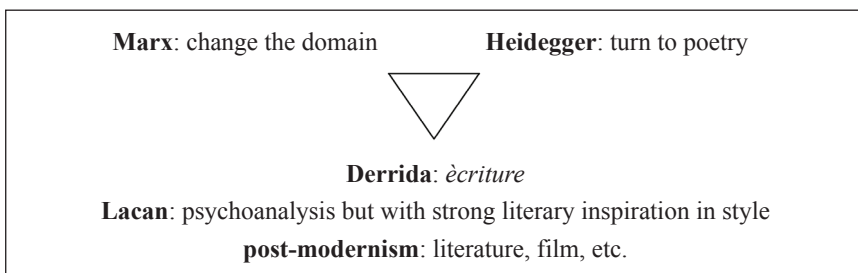
In German (1954): “Kein Wandel kommt ohne vorausweisendes Geleit. Wie aber naht ein Geleit, wenn nicht das Ereignis sich lichtet, das rufend, brauchend das Menschenwesen

er-äugnet, d. h. er blickt und im Erblicken Sterbliche auf den Weg des denkenden, dichtenden Bauens bringt?”

or a vanguard poem. One needs more literal readings than this to formulate a thesis, and to present reasons for and against it. Again, we can see here the result of the primacy of interpretation over critical discussion. If a dissenter asks “What reasons do we have to think of Being as a gift?”, one answer is that “we are just interpreting Heidegger”. As we said, what is thus immunized by hermeneutics is the strong AHO theorizing, Heidegger’s and Derrida’s presentation of fundamental ontological categories in a completely anthropomorphic guise, guided and protected by poetic, figurative form of discourse. Indeed, the right reaction to the claims couched in this semi-poetic style is not logical dissection, but empathy and the “right feeling”. The image of Being that gives itself as a gift, thus initiating a cycle of total forgetting and forgetfulness-of-Being is emotionally a highly charged one. Here is then the final message (of the chapter of the book dedicated to Heidegger). We first learn that in order to be possible, the gift has to be forgotten; this is the way to block the (anticipation of) reciprocation and counter-gift. And then we have the claim: forgetting is constitutive of gift, and is not unrelated to the (famous) forgetting of Being.

What is the link? Well, Being is a gift; forgetting is constitutive of the (history of) gift, so forgetting is constitutive of Being. The point is a strong AHO with a vengeance: the human forgetting of Being is constitutive of Being itself. What more is to be asked for? Derrida needed the paradoxical claim about impossibility of the gift in order to connect the gift with total forgetting. Once the connection is forged, with the help of rather poetic hermeneutical means, he ends up with a new interpretation of Heidegger’s idea of forgetfulness of being. It is now clear why the paradox is called for: no paradox, no need for dramatic total forgetting. Some critical questions might be asked: if the giver has to forget giving the gift, what is the situation in the case of Being as the giver and the given? Does Being forget Itself, or do humans forget Being (as Heidegger originally claimed)? What does it mean for Being to be forgetful? None of these is addressed by Derrida. Note that the philosophical expose (and later the discussion of some famous anthropologists) is framed within a rich framework of French literature, featuring Balzac and Baudelaire as main heroes, and possibly priming the reader to take a stance more alike to poetry or novel reading than the stance of argumentative questioning. The crucial move to the conclusion on Being and forgetting is introduced by the reference to a novel by Lucette Finas in which Heidegger appears under different names (p. 22); hardly a very argumentative move for passing to the main conclusion.

The most famous American thinker developing this line of thought is, of course, Richard Rorty; ironically, his style is always philosophical-argumentative, even when he defends the use of the opposite manner of writing. Graphically, the two traditions approach each other and finally converge:



Let me follow the lead of Rorty from his “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre”, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007), where he claims that

“[f]rom within a literary culture, religion and philosophy appear as literary genres. As such, they are optional.” (Rorty 2007: viii)

He sees philosophical ideas as

“... the form of proposals for new roles that men and women might play: the ascetic, the prophet, the dispassionate seeker after truth, the good citizen, the aesthete, the revolutionary. Sometimes they have been sketches of an ideal community – the perfected Greek polis, the Christian Church, the republic of letters, the cooperative commonwealth.” (Rorty 2007: ix)

And, most importantly:

“I urge that we look at relatively specialized and technical debates between contemporary philosophers in the light of our hopes for cultural change.” (Rorty 2007: x)

But Rorty is silent about the bad consequences of the dominance of semi-literary style, spilling over into purely literary style (often in service of political stance): uncontrolled use of metaphor and polysemy (without clearly pointing to the direction of decoding), and the death of argument. He does not mention that instead of getting into politics one often gets into politically engaged non-philosophical “studies”: black studies, queer studies, gender studies. For continentals in the US there was until recently little space in philosophy departments; they went to literature, film studies etc. On the other hand, the philosophically interested French continentals go into archive history work, and those politically and literally interested do the “cultural politics”. The snap is much stronger in France than in Germany, because the intensity of this “cultural revolution” is stronger in the former. A relatively recent continental version of the end and overcoming of philosophy claims that it should culminate and in a way disappear in “Theory”. What is “Theory”? Let me quote Žižek who talks about

“... the deconstructionist/feminist/post-Marxist/psychoanalytic/sociocritical/cultural studies etc. approach, ironically nicknamed ‘Theory’ (which, of course, is far from a unified field – the above chain is more a series of Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblances’) by its opponents.” (Žižek 2001: 1)

Of course, the approach has been designed as “Theory” within the “deconstructionist/feminist/post-Marxist/psychoanalytic/sociocritical/cultural studies”, with no irony implied. (I guess it comes from the term ‘Critical theory’ coined by the Frankfurt school.)<sup>9</sup>

An interesting further process is discernable along the way, a turn to pop-culture in post-philosophy. Where does it come from? First, pop-culture is very strong in culture. Second, and this is an internal philosophical reason, a strong value(s)-relativism accepted by main theorists leads to a dramatic leveling, raising the status of pop-aspects and parts of culture: Madonna and soap operas are as good as Beethoven and Eisenstein. Third, the general market favors books on pop-culture: if you write about Madonna you sell hundred times more than if you write only about Heidegger or Lacan. So, the pop-elements

9

Here is the context of Žižek’s claim: “... the principal contradiction of today’s cinema studies is the one between the deconstructionist/feminist/post-Marxist/psychoanalytic/sociocritical/cultural studies etc., approach, ironically nicknamed ‘Theory’ (which, of course, is far from a unified field – the above chain is more a series of Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblances’) by its opponents, and the so-called ‘Post-Theory’, the cognitivist

and/or historicist reaction to it. Here, however, we immediately encounter a paradox. Although Post-Theorists acknowledge the inner differences in the field of Theory (say, between the early Screen focus on interpellation, Gaze, suture, and the later more historicist-culturalist feminist orientation), they nonetheless emphasize a common Lacanian element as central.” (Žižek 2001: 1)

of cultural-historical-political practices get a place of honor in “Theory”. The more philosophically oriented post-structuralists (Derrida, Foucault) are read selectively in search for less philosophical (and more political) material. As Rorty said in the line we quoted, “the question ‘Is it true?’ has yielded to the question ‘What’s new?’” (Rorty 2007: 92). Pop-philosophy, pop-culture and daily politics get combined in an easily marketable production. So, this is the worst scenario: continental tradition ends as pop-philosophy. Let us hope this will not happen.

## Conclusion

Here is then the danger on the Continental side that might give rise to despair: the AHO thesis gives cultural-historical-political practices an ontological status. Orientation towards expressive and literary style diminishes the role of clear and explicit argumentation. Claims are being judged by poignancy of style and/or political agreement. Now, as long as an author is presenting oneself as doing philosophy, one is still responsible and hopefully responsive to the canons of the profession, at least in the implicit form of an ongoing practice. Even if a philosopher is indulging in a poetic re-interpretation of Plato or Aristotle, or in re-writing of their Ur-text in a manner inspired by the canon(s) of the profession, even when, and especially when, she is taking an ironical attitude towards their work. The paradigm examples are late Heidegger and Derrida of the seventies, plus their more academically oriented followers lovers of fine arts, like Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, or Dušan Pirjevec in former Yugoslavia, to name just three whose work I had been following in some detail.

However, once an author declares that she has moved beyond philosophy, beyond its tradition and practice, or that philosophy itself has been transformed-*aufgehoben* into a different subject, for instance into the variegated practice of “theory”, the last vestiges of the canon lose their grip on her production. And the first thing to go, under the whirl of literary politically engaged writing, is explicit reasoning, clear argumentation, and serious attempt to define and analyze. As one would expect, the situation is symmetrical to the opposite one, illustrated by the extremes that sometimes popped up within Vienna Circle: if an angry, anti-metaphysical philosopher entranced by science attempts to abolish philosophy, what will survive in his work will be argument, clarity, and analysis, often pushed into a formal mode, and what is going to be lost among the goodies of the mainstream philosophical tradition is the generality, depth, and human relevance of the ordinary philosophical practice.

Of course the presentation of the continental *Aufhebung* Thesis and its outgrows on the continental scene is shot through with critical and deconstructive pathos: commenting her target practices (gender-, race-, or class-focused) the philosopher gets rid of problematic and repressive metaphysics, and of the injustice of reason and knowledge. Philosophy moves to cultural politics, as Rorty wants it to move, and to Theory – cultural studies, black, feminist, gay studies – and the actual political struggle. They constitute whatever is its proper target of research. But the practices are already studied by cultural studies people, historians of literature, of political movements etc., so the philosopher just joins in. She or he starts talking about one’s work as about post-philosophy. Richard Rorty as the continental refugee from his own tough naturalism has come to the same result: the only value of philosophy is its contribution to cultural politics (Rorty 2007). The danger is that the link with

philosophy becomes hardly more than a sentimental memory revealing itself in the borrowing of some terminology and in mentioning of grand names. One would not expect that Continental philosophy would take such a path. Which, of course, only shows that the Real is the Impossible.

## References

- Bourgeois, Patrick L. (2001), *Philosophy at the Boundary of Reason: Ethics and Postmodernity*, New York: SUNY Press.
- Daly, Chris; Liggins, David (2011), “Deferentialism”, *Philosophical Studies* 156 (3), pp. 321–337.
- Derrida, Jacques (1992), *Given Time I: The Counterfeit Money*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1994), *Specters of Marx*, Routledge.
- Easton, Loyd D.; Guddat Kurt H. (1997), *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, Hackett Publishing Company.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1999), *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Heidegger, Martin (1954), “Überwindung der Metaphysik”, in: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen: Neske.
- Heidegger, Martin (1973), “Overcoming Metaphysics”, in: *The End of Philosophy*, translated and introduction by Joan Stambaugh, New York: Harper and Row.
- Hodge, Joanna (1995), *Heidegger and Ethics*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Lucy, Niall (2004), *A Derrida Dictionary*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rabinow, Paul (1984), *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Rorty, Richard (2007), *Philosophy as Cultural Politics, Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 4, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stern, Robert (2002), *Routledge Philosophy Guide Book to Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Wesphal, Kenneth R. (2003), *Hegel’s Epistemology: A Philosophical Introduction to the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Weston, Michael (1994), *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2001), *The Fright of Real Tears. Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, London: BFI Publishing.

**Nenad Mišćević**

## Ukidanje filozofije

### Sažetak

Tekst razmatra Tezu o kraju filozofije, vrlo popularnu u kontinentalnoj tradiciji. Teza kaže da bi filozofi trebali napustiti tradicionalno filozofske razmišljanje i zamijeniti ga aktivnim sudjelovanjem u teoretsko-kulturalnim djelatnostima, uglavnom obilježenima oštrim političkim angažmanom. Najneočekivanji događaj u povijesti Teze bilo je stapanje dviju struja: politizirana zamisao o ukidanju filozofije povezala se s pjesničkom alternativom, a taj je novi par zadio ogromno poštovanje u kontinentalnoj tradiciji, i tijekom se vremena više puta promijenio i preobrazio. Današnja verzija Teze naglašava sudjelovanje u politički relevantnim kulturalno-umjetničkim praksama kao konačno usmjerenje filozofije. Čini se da je taj zanimljiv put danas

*završio s prilično katastrofalnim posljedicama, s pozivom da se filozofiju »ukine« u nizu slabo povezanih političko-kulturalnih djelatnosti, od kojih su neke prilično efemerne. Povijesni dio teksta objašnjava kako je do tih posljedica došlo, i smješta problem u širi okvir.*

#### **Ključne riječi**

kontinentalna filozofija, kraj filozofije, ukinuće filozofije, političko-kulturalne djelatnosti

### Nenad Mišćević

## Aufhebung der Philosophie

#### **Zusammenfassung**

*Der Text behandelt die in der kontinentalen Tradition sehr populäre These vom Ende der Philosophie, nach der die Philosophen die traditionelle philosophische Auffassung aufgeben sollten, um sie mit der aktiven Einbindung in theoretisch-kulturelle Aktivitäten, die hauptsächlich politischer Natur sind, zu ersetzen. Das am wenigsten erwartete Ereignis in der Geschichte der These war die Vermischung zweier Strömungen: Die politisierte Idee von der Abschaffung der Philosophie verband sich mit der dichterischen Alternative. Dieses neue Paar stieß in der kontinentalen Tradition auf großen Respekt und durchlief im Laufe der Zeit stetige Veränderungen und Abwandlungen. Heutige These betont die Teilnahme an der politisch relevanten kulturgeschichtlichen Praxis als endgültige Richtung in der Philosophie. Es scheint, dass dieser interessante Weg heute relativ katastrophale Folgen nach sich zieht, mit dem Aufruf, die Philosophie in einer Reihe von politisch-kulturell schwach verbundenen Aktivitäten, von denen einige ziemlich kurzlebig sind, abzuschaffen. Der geschichtliche Teil des Textes erklärt, wie es zu diesen Folgen gekommen ist, und bettet das Problem in einen breiteren Kontext ein.*

#### **Schlüsselwörter**

kontinentale Philosophie, Ende der Philosophie, Aufhebung der Philosophie, politisch-kulturelle Praxis

### Nenad Mišćević

## L'abolition de la philosophie

#### **Résumé**

*Le texte traite de la thèse de la fin de la philosophie, sujet très populaire dans la tradition continentale. Selon celle-ci, les philosophes devraient abandonner la pensée philosophique traditionnelle pour la remplacer par une participation active dans les activités théoriques et culturelles, notamment marquée par un engagement politique fort. Un événement qui n'a pas été prévu par l'histoire est liée au fait que cette Thèse représenterait une fusion de deux courants : l'idée politisée de l'abolition de la philosophie connectée avec une alternative poétique. Cette nouvelle création a gagné un énorme respect/écho au sein de la tradition continentale. Elle fut d'ailleurs plusieurs fois changée et transformée au cours du temps. La version actuelle de la thèse insiste sur la participation dans la pratique culturelle et artistique, de l'importance politiquement pertinente de l'orientation finale de la philosophie. Il semble que ce voyage intéressant en ait terminé aujourd'hui avec les conséquences catastrophiques, en référence à la philosophie de « l'abolir » dans une série d'activités politico-culturelles mal connectées, dont certaines sont tout à fait éphémères. La partie historique du texte explique comment ces conséquences ont été produites, et situe ainsi le problème dans un cadre plus large.*

#### **Mots-clés**

philosophie continentale, fin de la philosophie, abolition de la philosophie, pratiques politico-culturelles