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# This Entrance Was Only Meant For You – Towards a Metaphysics of the Culture of Complaint

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## Abstract

This paper diagnoses a certain culture of complaint, which is a curious formation in the history of mankind that emerges exactly at the moment where the claim, that the “grand narratives” have lost their meaning, goes from being merely an academic postulate to becoming a commonly accepted cultural dogma. Rather than joyfully accepting the liberation from the ostensibly repressive grand narratives, the reaction typical of the members of the culture of complaint has been to blame the big Other for his non-existence. Having discussed this point we proceed to discuss the possibility of genuine political action, given such a bleak prognosis of our own current post-modern predicament. Via the literary work of Franz Kafka, a discussion is opened about the possibilities and constraints on political action in an era where transcendent legitimization is no longer available. The discussion partners are (first) Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Jacques Lacan.

**Keywords:** Culture of complaint, political action, metaphysics, Kafka, Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan.

*So why should I want anything from you? The court doesn't want anything from you. It receives you, when you arrive, and it lets you go, when you are leaving.*

– Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, (1951, p. 265, our translation).

## 0. The Man Who Sued God

There is a certain poetic justice to the fact that Patrick McCarville, who came up with the original idea for the film “The Man Who Sued God”, which was finally produced in 2001, was so disappointed at the premiere that he actually considered suing the producers. Not because he wasn’t satisfied with the film, but because he wasn’t credited adequately for being the creator of the actual plot of the movie: “I was promised I would be credited but when the movie came on there was no sign of my name up front. [...]. Now I find myself relegated to underneath the carpenter and the cleaning lady [in the credits] and I feel pretty bad about it.” (see Irwin 2001). The film tells the story of an Australian fisherman and former lawyer, Steve Myers, whose boat is destroyed by lightning. When Myers tries to collect the insurance money from the incident, he is told that the policy does not cover cases where accidents are the results of an “Act of God.” Instead of accepting this rejection, Myers decides to bite the bullet and sue God himself via His earthly representatives. The plot hasn’t got much more to it than this, and the movie is rather boring, with mediocre acting and directing. When McCarville nonetheless complained about the order of appearance in the acknowledgements, and not about the film itself, it can probably best be understood in the light of the 38 years it took from the time when he came up with the idea, until the film was finally produced. “This was my original idea”, as he said during the shooting of the film, and “if I do nothing else in my life at least I can say I came up with ‘The Man Who Sued God’.” (Ardell, 2001). His immediate reaction being that of a complaint, McCarville therefore ironically underlined the one true accomplishment of the film – to be a radical and satirical illustration of the “culture of complaint” (Hughes 1993) which we take to characterize a broad political and cultural tendency in contemporary Western culture. Robert Hughes has identified this culture of complaint as, among other things, an “all-pervasive claim to victimhood” which “tops off America’s long-cherished culture of therapeutics.” Hughes’ point is that, to make yourself count, you should complain, or at least always be prepared to complain. “Complaint gives you power.” (Hughes 1993, 12). We follow Hughes in the identification of a fundamentally important cultural trend in Western civilization that has only gained in momentum since his definition of the American culture as a ‘culture of complaint’, but we pursue it in a more specifically philosophical sense.

In this paper, more precisely, we pursue two questions, which to our minds are crucial for the understanding of this culture of complaint. First, there is the descriptive question of what the culture of complaint really is. What is it that drives the (post)modern subject, which seems to find itself satisfied only through complaining about dissatisfaction? This question is dealt with in the following chapter entitled “What Do You Want From

Me?” Second, there is the normative question of what we should do about it. Given that the contemporary political climate can meaningfully be described as residing in a *Stimmung* of complaint and thereby a kind of reactive behaviour to be determinant of our social engagements today, is it then at all possible to accomplish what could be called a political act, and if it is, how? This question is discussed in the third chapter entitled “How to Behead the King Twice.” In between, we will discuss Franz Kafka’s analysis of the relation between the subject and the Law, especially in *The Trial*, as a point of entrance for the identification of the “post-modern predicament”, if you will, after the fall of the big Other as the ultimate and meaning-giving guarantor of the moral and political standards in society. Recent political interpretations of Kafka in Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze/Felix Guattari are invoked to set the stage for our own remarks on political acts, which claim the necessity of moving beyond their respective approaches.

It should be mentioned from the start that we take a genuine political act to be something other than merely partaking in the activities that go on in various polities around the globe. A genuine political act is characterized by reorganising the very coordinates that structure these polities. Such a notion of the political act may be reminiscent of a certain revolutionary romanticism that is often thought of as belonging somewhere in the spectrum between naivety and utter irresponsible immorality. No such connection is necessary. The reorganization of the inherited political coordinates can be accomplished in many ways. In recent times it could be said that the women’s rights movement reorganised the given political coordinates, because the particular claims made by this particular political subject meant the reorganization of society as a whole. The political act undertaken by the emerging political subject “Woman”, might be described as violent in a certain sense, but we would insist that it was neither naïve nor immoral. Similar observations could be made about the civil rights movements in the USA and the anti-Apartheid movements in South Africa, and even about the revolutionary moment in Europe in the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall. To give yet another example, while taking the risk of prophesising, it could be said that today, more than anything we are in need of a genuine political act that not only makes us accept that climate changes are caused by us, but also accept that we may have to stop indulging in some of our most energy consuming pleasures in order not to destroy the planet we inhabit. Like women’s rights, climate change could become a political challenge of such dimensions that it could demand real political and economic changes (and not just “improved morals”, individual responsibility, etc.).

## 1. What Do You Want From Me?

The post-modern subject is telling stories. History has become histories – there is not one, all-encompassing tale about humanity in which each individual must find his or her place. Post-modernism is characterized, as Jean-François Lyotard put it, by “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). The “grand narratives” of religion, politics and spirit have become discredited through critique of metaphysics and the ideological disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, both theoretically (in logics, linguistics, philosophy, and literary theory) as well as practically (in politics), the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as a kind of traversing of the fantasy of a grand narrative that provides the coordinates for human life. A common reaction, from Lyotard’s epochal definition forward, became to assert the individual narrative as the only legitimate measure of validity. Each person has his or her story. The most basic right after the fall of the great narratives of the just and equal society was therefore widely held to be the right to narrate about *oneself*. It was in this sense paradigmatic for the Post Cold War conception of the human being, when Richard Rorty defined the fundamental dimension of a human being as the ability to suffer, to experience pain and humiliation, and, since humans are symbolic animals, the fundamental right to tell one’s own story of suffering (Rorty 1989). I am only insofar as I narrate myself, and because my narration must always be a narration that includes phenomena and influences beyond my control (other people, nature, accidents, death), the story will never be entirely flawless. The culture of complaint is the condition that has gradually grown from these premises. It is a condition where the subject finds herself unable to account for lacks or inconsistencies in her narration, including an explanation for the unpleasant things she experiences, and therefore she blames the Other for causing the inconsistency, or for being unable to fix it. The Other, on this account, is the field of the social that continues to play an immensely important role for the individual, even if there is no overall narrative that defines the subject’s place and identity within the social. We draw on Jacques Lacan’s use of the term of the “big Other”, or the Other with a capital O, to describe this peculiar phenomenon of an overarching giver of meaning that does not exist, but functions nonetheless. The Other plays a role in each of our lives – in early childhood, for instance, it is incarnated in the mother or the father – that is, it can be attributed to concrete others, when they are presumed to play the role of omnipotent or omniscient. The world makes sense, as long as it remains within the limits of what Father can explain. The analyst, in psychoanalysis, also steps in on behalf of the big Other and plays the role of the subject supposed to know, someone who is presumed to have the answers, in order for analysis to make any sense. Obviously, the same goes for God Almighty. In other words: in order to secure some safe and reliable points

of reference, we single out particular beings to whom are attributed the additional authority and capacity of the Other. The Other in this sense is that which “has a body and does not exist” (Lacan 2007: 66) – it functions via its representatives, it “has their bodies”, but it does not, itself, exist. The big Other, however, also means the symbolic order at large, which is why it functions, even when it doesn’t exist: There is no ultimate, identifiable agent behind the way in which language works and stories are told, but we proceed mostly as if there were. We must presume some sort of inherent sense in the system of language or in the social field as such, in order for us to even begin making sense of our own roles and endeavours. The functioning of the Other, even in the absence of its existence, is the tacit assumption, an everyday unsaid theology, that things must make sense, the way they are. The Other, thus, might not prescribe meaning and identity to the individual in so many words, but it remains the addressee as well as the medium through which the narrative must be constructed. I narrate myself through the Other and expect my narration to be heard by someone, a generalized Other, sometimes instantiated in concrete others. Thus, even though the grand narratives fail to exert their direct influence, the Other remains a silent partner that is expected to hear what the subject has to say, including what obstructs him or her in creating the perfect and meaningful individual story.

It is easy to simplify the story about the end of the grand narratives, though. The incredulity about the grand, overall, determining tales of religion and ideology has not meant that no other stories than the purely individual prevail. Every individual is simultaneously part of numerous stories that count concrete others – partners, families, friends, institutions, ethnic groupings, sexual or life style kindred spirits, nations – and indeed religions. The picture has certainly become more blurred, and the rigidity of overall systematic structures been dramatically reduced, but it would be a fallacious argument to claim that this condition has left us with only individual means of construction of meaning. Much more precisely, the pressure on the individual in the post-ideological condition of liberalist individualism could be described as the responsibility of assuming responsibility for constructing a coherent narrative out of *numerous* levels of identity and meaning; stories that intersect and contradict each other. The omnipotent Other behind all the occurrences in the world has not been replaced by an omnipotent individual with full autonomy and access to sovereign, unhindered narration. Therefore, a paradoxical longing for someone to hold responsible is re-emerging. Someone to sue for the lightning and the unforeseen, and someone to address, when all the various influences in our lives cannot be synthesized into unproblematic coherence.

Our claim is that this condition, the culture of complaint, is a logical consequence of the gradual disintegration of overarching metanarratives

since at least Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God. Nietzsche also identified a particular need for the Other, which seems to have run through human history at large (see Nietzsche 1956). The culture of complaint that we are living now, in this perspective, is not so much a radical novelty, but rather an historical moment of dispersed metanarratives and a plurality of minor and major narratives in their place. That is a point that will become clearer once we have taken a closer look at the *metaphysics* of the culture of complaint.

Even though we follow this diagnosis of dispersed metanarratives, we nevertheless argue that there is a metaphysical background to the culture of complaint. That is the case simply because it can be demonstrated that no matter what narrative one should choose to tell (grand or small) there is a structure of narration that always imposes itself. Crucially, however, this is not a structure that is founded upon any notion of substance, essence, God, the one, the subject, etcetera. Instead the structure of narration is a structuring that takes place around an internal inconsistency, an impossibility, even. The impossibility of a coherent self telling a flawless story is the metaphysical background of the particular relation between self and Other in the age of post-modern incredulity towards the stability and legitimacy of a big Other that provides a firm grounding of the social field. What we are claiming is thus that there is an inherent obstacle in any narrative, which unfolds on the individual as well as on any other level.

This impossibility can be explained in the following way. On the one hand there is the "I", which is being narrated, which is experiencing this pain, this joy, this unhappy love affair, which is reading this book, etcetera. On the other hand there is the "I", which is telling the story of the first I. The crucial inconsistency of this structure of narration becomes clear when we consider the possibility of including the second "I" in the story, which it is telling of the first. Such a move would mean the emergence of a third "I", which would be narrating the inclusion of the second "I" in the story about the first. And so on *ad infinitum*.<sup>1</sup> The crucial point is

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<sup>1</sup> This way of presenting the structure of self-relating has a very striking philosophical history. It was made to be one of the most crucial problems discussed by the German Idealists Fichte, Hegel and Schelling from the moment Fichte discussed the complex structure of the I in the first part of the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (Fichte 1971 [1794]). Particularly Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1970 [1807]) could be said to investigate in detail the development consciousness necessarily undergoes as a result of this kind of inherent inconsistency. When Hegel thus states that the truth is the whole (1970, 24), the point is exactly not that the whole can be given in any kind of finite form of narration. Rather, the point is that consciousness is condemned to experience again and again that no matter what it posits as the whole, this whole will always turn out to be contingent to the point from which it is posited. "The truth is the whole" means that the whole is uneasy, broken, and not able to fit itself. A more



that one is *never* fully at home in the narration one gives of oneself. The very structure of narration itself takes shape around this inconsistency, which in turn should be understood as a true metaphysical condition, in that it addresses the relation of being and language as such. What is revealed in this inconsistent structure of narration is the monstrous being – the “I” or the subject – which refuses integration into language. Furthermore, given the conclusion that the narrator never fits into the story he is telling about the world, the inverse point follows that the world, which is being narrated, is equally incomplete. No matter which story the monstrous I is trying to tell, it will always be the case that it in some way is broken and incoherent, exactly because it is being told from a vantage point that does not fit the narration itself.

Accepting this argument means accepting the point that there never was a coherent narrator and a coherent big Other to whom the story was told. It is not the case that there once was a coherent God above, a complete world below, and a coherent subject acting somewhere between them; nor is it the case that these grand narratives suddenly became false at a certain point in history. Instead, concrete historical formations should be understood through the way in which the gap at the heart of the self and the gap at the heart of the Other are filled up with some kind of substitute temporary completeness. The term ‘metaphysics’ in so far as it is taken to denominate a specific story about the fundamental structure and coherent ground of the world, should therefore always be taken to describe the reaction of a specific time, a concrete historical formation, to the fundamental metaphysical incoherence. All grand narratives were stories told in order to help us forget that there can be no coherent grand narratives.

This brings with it some crucial consequences for the formation we are investigating here, namely the metaphysics of the culture of complaint. What happened with the post-modern announcement of the end of all grand narratives should not be understood as a radical break with the *way* narrations are structured. Rather it meant that the fundamental impossibility of coherent narration itself became the theme of the narration. Post-modernism could in this sense very well be seen as the final step in a Hegelian movement of the world spirit coming to terms with itself (beyond the steps that were visible to Hegel himself). The self-realization of world spirit is exactly what takes place the moment world spirit realizes that it is already dead.<sup>2</sup> The culture of complaint is a curious formation

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recent but very elegant discussion of the necessary flaw at the heart of the structure of narration is found in Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, this seemingly very anti-Hegelian Hegelianism is not so anti-Hegelian after all. It is a crucial feature of Hegel’s interpretation of the Religion of Revelation

that takes place at the precise moment where the notion that God is dead becomes a part of the commonly accepted narratives.

What happens in the culture of complaint is absolutely not that the notion of God's death is triumphantly cried out from every rooftop, and that we can from here on finally take our lives in our own hands. Instead, the crucial manoeuvre of this particular culture consists in complaining to God that he never existed after all. In this precise sense there is a genuine metaphysics pertaining to the culture of complaint, a metaphysics in the sense of a concrete formation of the story of why there is no gap at the heart of narration. Only this metaphysics is functioning in a rather surprising way since it is effectively filling the gap at the centre of narration with the very gap itself.

The tragedy of much post-modernist theory about the end of grand narratives is thus the curious fact that the completion of the treatment seems not to have cured the patient. We still exhibit symptoms and cling to the big Other as the explanation of them, *even though we have learned that he does not exist*. As Slavoj Žižek has described it very precisely, we paradoxically seem to be blaming the big Other that he doesn't exist. This is Žižek:

... far from cheerfully assuming the non-existence of the big Other, the subject blames the Other for its failure and/or impotence, as if the Other is guilty of the fact that he doesn't exist, that is, as if impotence is no excuse – the big Other is responsible for the very fact that it wasn't able to do anything: the more the subject's structure is 'narcissistic', the more he puts the blame on the big Other, and asserts his dependence on it (Žižek 2000, p. 361).

The crucial point about the culture of complaint is thus a certain paradox, which bears a striking similarity to the development from 'false consciousness' to 'enlightened false consciousness' described by Peter Sloterdijk in his *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (1983). According to Sloterdijk, enlightenment arrives at an impasse in the phenomenon of cynicism (which Sloterdijk argues to be entirely different from classical Greek cynicism), because what is encountered in cynicism is the paradox that even though the post-modern self-narrators know very well that there are terrible consequences to the practices they are enmeshed in, and that there is no one else "besides" themselves to blame for them, (the ever more threatening climate catastrophe would be an obvious example here), they nevertheless keep on doing what they do. In the culture of complaint, the non-existence of the big Other is as clear as day, but we nonetheless blame him for

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towards the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1970, 545ff) that the ultimate result of incarnation is the fact that God must die. And not merely in the form of the incarnated Son. The God who dies on the cross is the transcendent substance – the God of the beyond. A recent and very powerful reading of these crucial passages in Hegel is found in Alenka Zupančič's *The Odd One In* (Zupančič 2008, 36–40).

this fact; we keep up the practice of transposing the responsibility for our problems to the big Other. Even if we are well aware that the Other does not exist, we seek someone to fill in his shoes once again – someone who can explain and give sense to the way things are going. (We blame the companies and the politicians for failing to deal adequately with imposing climate changes, but yet we continue buying the same cheap, unsustainable commodities and elect the politicians that *de facto* promise us *not* to take sufficiently radical measures).

In the field of psychoanalytic practice we find another very striking analogy. Here, the fall of the big Other signifies the end of the psychoanalytic treatment. If the analyst, in the beginning, as it was said, functions as a stand-in on behalf of the big Other, analysis can be finalized only when the Other falls; when the subject supposed to know is revealed to have been, precisely, only a stand-in, and not to have the answer after all. However, this also marks the point of great risk for the subject of the analysis. If, that is, the treatment is completed in the sense that the analysand comes to realize that “there was nothing there” – that, for example, the paranoiac obsession was caused by herself, and not by a “real” threat or danger from the Other, then this immediately seems to be a great liberation. There was nothing to fear, as it were. The curious fact is that sometimes the direct opposite of relief is the result. The completion of the treatment implies a real danger of a psychotic breakdown, since the subject comes to realize that she *has* no support in the big Other; that it “doesn’t want anything from her”. If that is true – then what *am* I? What should I do? Psychoanalytic patients tend to cling on to their symptoms even *after* they have been interpreted adequately. “I know very well that I am blaming my father only because I cannot bear the abyss of responsibility in doing something about it myself, but nevertheless... I keep blaming my father.”

So, the traumatic realisation of the non-existence of the big Other implies a radical awareness of the responsibility of one’s own identity-formation with all its flaws and inconsistencies. In order to escape the consequences of this awareness (which would imply that I would have to change *myself*), the subject tends to look for an outside obstacle to the fullness and harmony of its identity. The absence of the Other, one could say, is compensated through the discovery–creation of an other as stand-in, in the almost literal sense of standing-in-the-way of the subject’s creative and autonomous self-realization. Things aren’t working well, because of .... the Jews/Gypsies/Muslims/Unemployed/Waitresses/TV-hosts ... The post-modern conception of the right to narrate oneself in this way unfolds as a construction of a coherent story of identity-formation, which is unfortunately obstructed from the outside. Or put in another way: I exist, I subsist, I uphold my existence by clinging on to my symptom, in so far as I am obstructed/suffering in *this* particular way.

In this way we immediately take the plunge back into metaphysics, exactly at the moment when we believe that we have made the most radical separation from it. The more we think we free ourselves from the grand narratives of the past, the more we seem to end up relying upon them. This indeed is a precarious situation. It is one that seems to render any sort of radical emancipatory political action impossible. And so the present argument could at this stage be seen as having a rather conservative demeanour, since it seems as if whatever we do to break free from the chains of History, we are doomed to fail, because the metaphysical conditions that underlie all history are only strengthened by our attempts to escape them.

Our point is not to argue the futility of politics – in fact we wish to argue exactly the opposite. But it follows from the present argument that there are certain kinds of so-called political practice that are essentially futile or even counterproductive. One of them is the practice of suing God for not being there. In other words the practice of consistently placing blame on the Other, in whatever shape the Other might be conceived. The modern world is capable of delivering an unlimited range of new objects that can be inserted as ‘that which can be blamed for my lack of access to full enjoyment’. The form of politics that has the identifying of the one thing (Gypsies, Jews, Journalists, Muslims, Intellectuals, etc. etc.), which inhibits my enjoyment, as its *raison d’être*, is of course reactionary and entirely unproductive.

But equally problematic is the practice that could be termed the liberal or multiculturalist agenda of establishing an order of recognition of the various identities within the symbolic order. This agenda focuses on the right of a culturally defined group of individuals to construct their identity, which entails a representation of the big Other as the protector of this right. By so doing, this agenda undermines the possibility of a more radical question about the status of the symbolic order itself, let alone the subject’s own position within it. The liberal/multiculturalist agenda is cynicism in its most pure form, because it makes any questioning of any notion of the big Other impossible. Everyone is entitled to his own cynical pathologies, and since there is no justification for others to impose their values and views onto their neighbours, (Muslims have no right telling gays how to live, etc.), the Other is reasserted as the neutral benefactor that leaves everyone in peace. This is why everything should be done very carefully in the culture of complaint. Be careful not to violate the other by describing her in inappropriate ways, by harassing her, disturbing her, not warning her (that her coffee might be hot), or, indeed: putting her name too low in the list of acknowledgements.

## 2. This entrance was only meant for you

As we mentioned in the beginning there are two sides to the argument we are making. The second part of the argument is going to deal with the problem of the possibility of genuine political action. Given the points that have been presented so far, that problem can now take the form of the following question: What does it mean to act politically, when the big Other is no longer there to rebel against?

In order to approach this question, we will try to tackle the issue of the Law in Kafka's work. The reason for taking up Kafka here should be mentioned first. In their *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature* (1986) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that Kafka should be seen as part of a larger tendency that gained in force towards the end of the Hapsburg empire.

At random, we can cite the following among Kafka's contemporaries: Einstein and his deterritorialization of the representation of the universe [...]; the Austrian dodecaphonists and their deterritorialization of musical representation [...]; the expressionist cinema and its double movement of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the image [...]. Of course, we should mention Viennese psychoanalysis and Prague school linguists. (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 24).

The general idea here is obvious and well known. Important changes occurred in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was as if the end of World War One meant the ultimate and irrevocable fall of the Ancien Régime. Here, finally, the King was beheaded. Both the Hapsburg and the Zarist empires fell. In other words what Deleuze and Guattari identify as the crucial events of Kafka and his time are precisely the beginning of the development that has ended up with the formation that we are here terming the culture of complaint. Our ambition with taking up Kafka is therefore to try to see if there could be given any alternative outcomes to the fall of the big Other, other than the situation in which it has become a common sport to sue him for the fact that he was never there after all. We find in Kafka a sort of world historic impact of the coming-to-awareness of humanity that there is no big Other that wants something particular with us and our lives.

According to Deleuze and Guattari it was not only the ancient forms of power that became antiquated in the process they term deterritorialization. In all areas of life the general experience was that of a weakening of the sense and explanatory force of the concepts of the old world. Following the description of Deleuze and Guattari, the overarching experience of Kafka and his contemporaries was one of deterritorialization. Where the big Other used to act as the determinant force that divided the world in territories, his fall meant the disappearance of the coordinates through which we used to understand exteriority and interiority. It should be

noted that deterritorialization is not merely something that takes place in geography. Rather it is first and foremost something that takes place in the register of sense and meaning. It was the inherited coordinates of belonging, the cartography of possible subject-positions, that were dissolved.<sup>3</sup>

The point that essential changes occurred in Europe and ultimately in world society as a whole at the beginning to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while important, is hardly surprising. To describe these processes of change under the heading of deterritorialization does make great sense, but it still leaves a question to be answered regarding the scope and range of that process. Particularly important is the question whether deterritorialization can at all be completed in the way envisioned by Deleuze and Guattari. Is it possible to conceive of the fall of the big Other in such a way that the post-modern storytellers do not continue to cling to his absence in any way? Is there a way in which deterritorialization might result in emancipation?

Taking up Kafka in the attempt to tackle this question makes sense, not only because of the historical reasons mentioned above, but also because his work more than anything seems to evolve around this question: What is it like to live in a world where the big Other no longer exists? Accordingly, widely divergent readings are available. Some claim that Kafka's is a work about the disappearance of the Law into an absolute and secluded transcendence. Representative of this reading is Jacques Derrida (see e.g., 1990, 1992).

The other reading that we will consider is that of Deleuze and Guattari. Their central point is to insist on the possibility of completing the process of deterritorialization, and that only by doing so, can it become emancipatory in its own right. The true catastrophe, according to Deleuze and Guattari, would be to stop at a half-way-point, where the fall of the big Other only results in an exchange of a positive transcendence (which assigns territories and subject-positions in a clear and direct manner) for a negative one (which stops assigning territories and subject-positions, but which nevertheless succeeds in making us despair in the futile pleading to the big Other that he should give us these assignments once again).

The common feature of Derrida on the one hand and Deleuze and Guattari on the other is the diagnosis that the experience of (post-)modernity, which surfaces in Kafka, is one in which the relation between law

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<sup>3</sup> There is one more point, which should be made with regard to the above quotation. Deleuze and Guattari are ostensibly dragging their feet in saying "Of course, we should mention Viennese psychoanalysis and Prague school linguists." It is clear that they are not thrilled at the prospect of giving any ground to psychoanalysis. Indeed, "Oedipus" could rightly be said to be the prime target of their critical endeavour.



and justice is severed. When the big Other falls, there is no longer anyone, who can guarantee that there is a link between law and justice. There is no longer a grand narrative that tells us that if we abide the law, in the end justice will be served. In order to be able to explicate the consequences of this chiasm in Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari respectively, it will be helpful to introduce a terminological distinction within the concept of the law, which is not always clear in their respective works. We thus distinguish between the law as that which is the object of study in a specific academic discipline, which is the object of political debates, and which is applied in the courtroom on the one hand, and the Law, which guarantees the link between the law in the first sense and justice. When we thus say that Kafka's work should be seen as the exposition of life in the age of the absence of the big Other, we could also describe it as the description of life after the disappearance of the Law.

The ways in which Derrida on the one hand Deleuze and Guattari on the other interpret this disappearance are widely different. To Derrida the result is that justice is forever lost in the transcendent realm. Justice is always "to come" (*avenir*) (1990: 993). Whatever justice is, it is that which we can never quite reach, but which we must nevertheless strive towards; justice is infinitely postponed into the future, but that only puts a demand on us to enact it. To Deleuze and Guattari however, the fact that the Law loses its meaning, which follows from its inability to guarantee justice, does not mean that we lose contact with justice. Quite the opposite in fact. The inexplicability of the Law does not mean a loss of justice. It rather means the dissolution of the grand narrative, which not only stipulated the link between law and justice, but also and more importantly, that we had to go through the law in order to arrive at justice. No longer having to pass through the law in order to arrive at justice, the separation of the link between justice and law results in justice being immediately accessible to us. "Justice is desire and not law." (1986: 49).

## 2.1 Transcendence

In the transcendence-reading, the law is characterized by utter indecipherability. We are always "Before the Law" like the man from the country in the parable from *The Trial* that bears that name. In this story the man from the country arrives at the gates of the Law and asks for permission to enter of the doorkeeper there. He is told that he cannot enter at the moment, and so he sits himself in front of the gates to the Law. He ends up waiting there for the rest of his life, until at the very end, just before he dies, the doorkeeper tells him that the entrance in fact "was meant for him alone" – which of course is the origin of our title.

To understand this parable in terms of transcendence it is clear that the crux of the matter is this last remark. If the entrance to the Law was only meant for the man from the country, how could it then be transcendent or completely out of reach and therefore inexplicable? The point is that the transcendence of the Law does not simply effect the exclusion of the man from the country from its interior. If that were the case he would have been able to safely return home having been denied entrance. The story would have been a case of “each to his own”, the man would have had his, and the Law would have had its. The point is of course that the man is already *in* the Law, being positioned outside it at its gates. Our exclusion from the Law is at the same time our inclusion into it. It is because the Law is out of reach that we are caught in its power. The transcendence of the Law is therefore not due to its being behind closed doors. Rather, the transcendence of the Law is due to its openness. Exactly because the Law does not want anything from us, because “It receives you, when you arrive, and it lets you go, when you are leaving”, therefore we cannot decipher its meaning, which remains forever transcendent. This most radical openness therefore turns out to be the hiding place of the Law; openness revolves into indislosure. The transcendence of the Law does not mark a border impossible to cross, rather it is the shape of a Law that never reveals its intent.

Descriptively, the transcendence reading is to some extent on a par with the analysis we gave above of the culture of complaint. If we are right in our claim that the moment of liberation from the big Other so far only seems to result in an increased attachment to him, then there certainly is something to be said for the notion of empty transcendence. Derrida does not stop at the descriptive level. He draws normative conclusions as well. Given the transcendence of the Law, justice seems equally lost. To Derrida justice is incalculable (1990: 971). But that is only half the truth. The other half is found in the infinite demand that is placed upon us, who are positioned before the law. Because we are left without a clue as to how justice should be calculated, since there is no sign from the now transcendent and thus infinitely distant Other to tell us how we are to calculate, *we ourselves are required to invent our own way of doing it*. “Incalculable justice requires us to calculate” (ibid.).

To our minds this conclusion is too weak. The transcendence-reading of Kafka is one of negative theology. There is transcendence, but it is an entirely empty one. The transcendent Other no longer tells us, what we should do, but the empty form of the demand remains. This empty form of the demand, however, not only tells us that it does not tell us what we should do, it also tells us that nothing can ever reclaim the transcendent position of enunciation. No particular project can ever again claim the universal position, from where it can be said, what is the good for all. From this point on the transcendence reading fails to give the necessary



account of genuine political action, which we announced in the introduction. Because of this structure of negative transcendence, any political project, which tries to reorganize the very coordinates of our current political practice, which seeks a revolution in the method of calculation, immediately seems illegitimate. No one can justly claim a position outside of the given method of calculating justice.

The transcendence reading at best ends up in bed with what we termed the liberal or multiculturalist agenda of reciprocal recognition for all. Since the only external rule is the one stating that there can be no external rules, everyone is entitled to be recognized, which means to be a factor in the calculation of justice. There is of course a democratic ideal to be defended in the demand for universal recognition. But the exclusion of external critiques of the method of calculation first and foremost means that what everyone is entitled to is to have his or her story of the prevalence of the big Other recognized. Paradoxically, therefore, the infinite transcendence of the big Other simultaneously means its proliferation – everyone is entitled to his own story of why the big Other is still alive and well.

## 2.2 Immanence

Leaving the field of transcendence, we can now approach what appears to be a more promising path of immanence. We say promising, because the most crucial feature of Deleuze and Guattari's reading is their insistence upon leaving all signs of melancholy and sadness behind. Here the inexplicability of the law in no way causes an experience of loss or even stress. Rather, it is a cause of joy. This places their reading in direct opposition to the negative theology that we saw was an integrated part of the transcendence reading (see e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 43ff).<sup>4</sup>

The crux of the problem, which Deleuze and Guattari find in the idea of the transcendence of the Law and the connected negative theology, is the interiorizing of guilt. Indeed, by placing it in the entirely negative realm of transcendence, meaning in the pure empty formalism of an infinite demand, we, the subjects of the Law, are made to be inherently guilty.

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<sup>4</sup> It also means that we have already placed ourselves in opposition to them, simply by focussing on the parable "Before the Law." In *The Trial* the parable is told (by a priest) in the chapter "In the Cathedral", which is the penultimate of the book, as we know it today. The claim of Deleuze and Guattari is that both "In the Cathedral" and the final chapter, which describes K's execution, have been misguidedly placed at the end of the novel by Max Brod, who was all too convinced of his own thesis of negative theology. And so the very focus upon the parable, seems to position us at some distance from the reading of Deleuze and Guattari.

The only thing we know of the transcendent Law is that it demands something, which we can never adequately accommodate. The Derridaian point that incalculable justice requires us to calculate, can to Deleuze and Guattari only mean the demand that we should invent our own ways of restraining desire. The infinitely transcendent Law is equal to infinite and irrevocable guilt. It is the sadness that is installed in the subject alongside this guilt, which clearly seems to turn the stomach of Deleuze and Guattari. But they also claim to see that it is something entirely different that is going on in Kafka's novels.

First and foremost the Law is not inexplicable because of its transcendence. It is not so much the fact that the Law does not reveal itself that makes it indecipherable. Rather it is because it continuously reveals itself to be somewhere else. In the building of the Law there is always another door. The Law is indecipherable, not because it is always only to come, but because it was always already right next door. To the credit of Deleuze and Guattari this point is evident *even* (cf. note 5) in the parable "Before the Law", which was supposed to be the cardinal point for the transcendence approach. "But beware," the doorkeeper says, "I am powerful. And I am only the lowest of the doorkeepers. From room to room there are doorkeepers; one more powerful than the other. Already the gaze of the third I cannot even bear myself" (Kafka 1951, p. 256, our translation).

Once we give up on the notion of the transcendence of the Law, an entirely different reading of Kafka becomes possible, according to Deleuze and Guattari. With it "the idea of the tragic, of the internal drama, of the intimate tribunal, and so on" disappear (1986: 45). And they claim that this way of seeing the work is much more in line with what is actually in the text than the sad transcendence of the Law could ever be. Deleuze and Guattari thus believe that the negative theology and the notion of empty transcendence is descriptively wrong – first and foremost with regard to Kafka, but second of all with regard to the phenomena of deterritorialization, which we saw them describe as his contemporaries above. Their claim is that deterritorialization is in fact brought to its fulfilment in Kafka, and that it is only the interpreters of negative theology who drag him back into some figure of transcendence.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> They acknowledge that "Kafka holds out the bait" as they say (1985:45). "He holds it out even, and especially, to Oedipus; not from complacency but because he wants to make a very special use of Oedipus to serve his diabolical purpose" (ibid.). A comment that very nicely brings us back to the issue of psychoanalysis. Why is it that Deleuze and Guattari are so keen to counterpoise themselves to psychoanalysis? To them the problem posed by Oedipus is the idea that Law precedes desire. It is the idea that it is only because there is Law, which forbids, that we learn to desire that which is forbidden. In this sense the whole crux of the Oedipus complex can be found in the fact that Oedipus flees his home, when he is told that he shall kill his

Their project is, in other words, normative first and descriptive second. More than anything Deleuze and Guattari see Kafka as a prophet – as an example to be followed. And in the wake of this they point out the reactionary inclination hidden in any descriptive approach to his work, which sees in it a negative theology.

The crucial question is, of course, if the same thing can be said for the culture of complaint. Are we simply doing a great injustice to a thoroughly emancipatory movement, when we interpret the post-modern storytellers as subjected to something that could be said to be reminiscent of negative theology? Do we not simply miss the true emancipatory potential that is unfolding itself right before our eyes in the culture where everyone is able to tell his own story and accordingly make up his own trajectory in life? That could probably be argued. Nevertheless, if we investigate the description given by Deleuze and Guattari, we believe that we can show how this alleged emancipatory potential itself hides a very specific transcendent demand. This in turn has the advantage of enabling us to show how the two approaches to Kafka presented here are very much alike with regard to one specific theme that is crucial to the culture of complaint.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, K's experiences in *The Trial* are not the sufferings of someone, who is desperately searching for meaning and ultimately the Law. Rather, K. is seen as someone experimenting with the world he encounters. K. is a machine that is constantly on the lookout for other machines, to which he can attach himself. The question for him is never, is this right or wrong, nor is it, am I being treated justly or not, but simply: how does this function? How can I connect to that? To them *The Trial* should be seen as an unending series of experiments and couplings. It should be noted in this regard that the translation of the title of the work from the German *Der Prozess* to the Eng-

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father and have incestuous relations with his mother (which of course leads him on the path to killing his true father and marrying his true mother) (see Sophocles). The reason for the flight of Oedipus is that given the prophecy, which tells him that he will do what the Law forbids, he discovers that he really wants to. This leaves desire as something entirely reactive and secondary. Just like we can only ever reach justice through the Law, so too can we only ever reach desire through the law. But this structure of the Law does not stop at that. It also pits desire and justice as the absolute opposites of each other. In this sense justice becomes equal to taking flight from desire. As we remember their conclusion is the exact opposite. Once we get rid of the Law, we are able to discover an immediate link between justice and desire. One should be careful here. Justice is desire only if desire is not determined by the law that forbids. Only if we can fully free ourselves from the principle that the Law is the author of desire, can we say that desire is equal to justice. And this is indeed what Deleuze and Guattari find expressed in Kafka.

lish *The Trial* easily makes us lose sight of the crucial duality to the German term 'Prozess'. While a 'Prozess' can rightly be translated strictly into a juridical process, it can also be used more generally as the English term process: for example, in chemistry as aerobic- and anaerobic processes. In this sense *Der Prozess* is exactly experimentally following a process of continuous coupling.

In Deleuze and Guattari's thought, such experimentation points towards the idea that desire should be seen as productive in its own right. Desire is a machine. It produces. Not because there are hindrances to be overcome, but because it attaches itself to other machines which produce. This is the opening of their perhaps most famous collaborative work, *Anti-Oedipus*: "It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits, it fucks. What a mistake to have ever said *the* id. Everywhere *it* is machines – real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections [...]. The breast is a machine that produces milk, and the mouth is a machine coupled to it" (2004: 1). Desire is life unfolding itself. Taking this notion of desire as the principle through which political action should be thought is nothing exceptional. It could very well be described as the political project of the Multitude as it is conceived by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt – more than anything it is the guiding idea behind their much debated collaborative work (Hardt and Negri 2001a, 2001b). This project concerns the proliferation of forms of life. There is not one subject that is the adequate author of genuine political acts (be it the people, the working class, the women, the queer). Rather there is the fundamental force of life unfolding itself in a multiple way. There are loose couplings and assemblages, but there cannot be any fundamental form that determines the adequacy of couplings and connections. There is only the idea that the more and the more varied the better. This idea carries with it a particular notion of democracy. A democracy not of individuals, but of desires. As long as desire is not fostered in reaction to the Law, it should be recognised alongside all others.

While there certainly is something refreshing in a less "Kafkaesque" reading of Kafka, we find that there is at least one problem with this reading, if it is to be utilized in our current context of giving sense to the notion of a genuine political action after the fall of the big Other. In Deleuze and Guattari we are set free to live out our desires. We are to joyfully make connections in an open field of immanence. The question is, however, whether the slightest of demands is still lurking, even as desire is set free in this way. Namely, the demand that we ought to follow our desire. This is no simple demand. Indeed, it could easily be identified as *the overarching imperative* of our current post-modern predicament. Whatever you do, be sure to always enjoy yourself. The absence of prohibitions

is thus never simple absence – it is itself a prohibition. Not only are there no prohibitions; they are prohibited.

In this way the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari secretly end up in the very same place as Jacques Derrida! On a par with what we above termed the liberal or multiculturalist agenda of mutual recognition. As we described above, this agenda consists in entitling everyone to tell their own particular story of how the big Other is still alive and well. If we follow their thought of deterritorialization, there is certainly no longer one big narrative (of the Law) that determines inside and outside, or that can tell right from wrong. And that is the good news. Completely freed from the binary logics that accompany such an overarching narrative, we can finally achieve the liberation of desire and justice, according to Deleuze and Guattari. But once we see that this liberation in itself carries with it the demand that one should live out one's desire, the big Other returns in the form of the universal prohibition to prohibit. Aren't we today getting precisely the message from 1968, "It is prohibited to prohibit", back in a perverted form? Everyone is entitled to his or her own perversions. Everyone is entitled to his own form of submission to the demand that we should always strive to enjoy ourselves. Maybe one could even talk of a "perverse core of multiculturalism"...

### 3. How to Behead the King Twice

In the end the two readings of Kafka and the trajectories they present for political thought in our current predicament seem very much alike. The big Other never really disappeared in either of them. How can that be? In terms of the transcendence-reading this is utterly clear. What occurs here at the moment of the fall of the big Other is not that the big Other himself disappears. He only stops telling us what he wants from us. As we saw, that can only result in the demand put to us being that much stronger. We no longer have the big Other's blessing in the form of the guarantee of the Law that tells us that if we follow the law, then justice will be served in the end. We are left to make our own guarantees, but we are also required not to utter them in any sort of universalizing voice. The place of the big Other is to be left empty. Therefore all we can do is to calculate justice as we best see fit, according to the rules that we already have.

In the immanence reading, the big Other definitely has fallen. There is no longer any Guilt because there is no longer any demands put on us at all, not even the empty ones that figure in the negative theology of the transcendence reading. But it turns out that the big Other returns in the form of the demand that we should all live out our pleasures. God is not dead, he is unconscious. It is this emerging of a new transcendent

demand at the very heart of the immanence of desire that Deleuze and Guattari are not able to account for (see Dolar 2006: 166). The radical immanence reading in the end lacks the tools to describe why we keep insisting that there could be some transcendent meaning to the Law. Or to speak in psychoanalytic terms, it cannot give a description of why we keep on clinging to the big Other even after we have witnessed his fall. To use the words of Mladen Dolar: “There might be no inside and there might be no outside, but the problem of the intersection remains.” (ibid.)

So, the political implication of an alternative reading of Kafka could be that the silence of the Other should be interpreted in another way than in both Derrida and Deleuze/Guattari. While we agree with the latter that it is not enough to modestly and indefinitely aspire to guess what the Other could have wanted with his demand, we also do not accept that we are simply left with our own musings of finding new and interesting ways to live out our desire. Surprisingly enough, the liberation of desire as it is described by Deleuze and Guattari results in their not being able to live up to the psychoanalytic dictum “do not cede upon your desire” (Lacan 1997, p. 321). To never cede to one’s desire does not mean to simply strive to get what one wants. Rather, it means insisting upon desiring instead of achieving the immediate aim of one’s desire. To never cede to one’s desire means choosing to desire, when faced with the choice between desiring and the object of one’s desire. It means the realization that there cannot be a definite answer as to what one desires. And it means embracing this fact. This is the ultimate consequence of the fall of the big Other: there is no longer anyone, who can tell us exactly what the object of our desire really is, but this does not mean that we have to “settle” with either of the two alternatives described above. Roughly put, the Derridean eternal postponement of justice and the silence of the Other could be paraphrased as a radically modest interpretation of the consequences of Lacan’s dictum that desire is always the desire of the Other (because the answer to the question of the right thing to do must therefore indefinitely escape us), while the Deleuzian answer is the one of pure immanence in the sense that “we know very well what we desire, now let’s live it out”. Our emphasis instead is on the insistence on desire as such – a pure desire, if you will, one that “unreasonably” goes to the end and asserts itself as the new, unfounded, but *right* answer to the eternal question “what should be done?” A “pure” desire would be one that is not concerned with petty, subjective, immediate interests, but is desire freed from any binding. It is not that I demand the right to have my desires satisfied, but that I assume the right to interpret what is worth desiring in this particular situation. My claim thereby reaches beyond a subjective urge to live out various exciting alternative forms of enjoyment and into the realm of the universal. As Lacan himself says, the “pure desire” thus envisioned (maybe surpris-



ingly) resembles Kant's categorical imperative, which "looked at more closely, is simply desire in its pure state, that very desire that culminates in the sacrifice, strictly speaking, of everything that is the object of love in one's human tenderness" (Lacan 1998, 275–276).

That the question of the intersection remains, as Dolar put it, means that all forms of secure guidance as to what one should do disappear, both on the side of the law and on the side of desire, but it also means, precisely, that there is a significant sense in which a place is left open after the fall of the Other. What the man from the country does not dare, in our reading of Kafka, is to perform "*La Passe*" – the passage to the other side. This other side is not a "transcendent" realm of eternal truth, but it is nonetheless something more than a merry acceptance of the conditions in immanent reality. "This entrance was only meant for you" means: you may pass over into the position of the analyst; there is an opening in the functioning of the law that permits you to step out from the perspective of pure immanence and regard the establishment of a new law as a pure act on behalf of the Law. You may assume the perspective of the Law. The Law, in other words, is a transcendent dimension to immanent reality itself, *because of its fundamental failure to ground itself in a transcendent dimension*. The problem of the intersection remains and opens the perspective of the truly political. In this sense, the passage into the Law means a transgression of the law, and simultaneously the only true assertion of the fact that the Law has fallen. Therefore, the act that reasserts the Law can only do so in a "headless subjectivation" that transcends the realm of what the subject had hitherto been clinging to as its desired state. The political act leaves behind the coordinates of the ancient regime, and it reinvents the very conditions of anything counting as a political subject: Woman, black, child – and maybe now the Future Others, as Kojin Karatani has called them; those that must now be included in our present political concerns in a radically new way, if we are to avoid a climatic catastrophe, which means that we must once again reinvent the field of the political without any guarantee that it will be possible (Karatani 2003: 125). The political subject does not wait in front of the door of the Law until it dies, nor does it go home and indulge in creative pleasures, because it has learned that the Law does not exist. It enters the Law and reinvents itself.

The King must be beheaded twice: The first time as the transcendent, untouchable sovereign that establishes Law; the second time as the unconscious master soliciting us to remain on the side of the law and enjoy our lives. A genuine act implies a departure from the contingent coordinates of the law, whether it be the law of the Other or the law of desire (that is, one's own inclinations and interests). In this sense, the political subject "must step over to the side of the Law", much as Alenka Zupančič has described the characteristic of any "real act worthy of the name". The subject of such an act is not ...

... a 'full' subject who knows exactly what he wants but, rather, [...] the subject 'is realized', 'objectified' in this act: the subject passes over to the side of the object. The ethical subject is not a subject who *wants* this object, but, rather, this object itself. In an act, there is no 'divided subject': there is the 'it' (the Lacanian *ça*) and the subjective figure that arises from it. We may thus conclude that the act in the proper sense of the word follows the logic of what Lacan calls a 'headless subjectivation' or a 'subjectivation without subject'" (Župančič 2000: 103–104).

In a real act there is something "too much", which is exactly what allows the subject to "pass over to the side of the object" – or in our context, to the side of the Law. The Law becomes accessible only when the subject fully assumes its inexistence.

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