Subjectivity
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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Hegel, subjectivity and youth

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Abstract

This article discusses how the constant pressure for young people to optimise themselves, to become the masters of their lives and to enjoy life to the full, instead of leading towards a new empowered citizenship, can also be experienced as an existential burden. It does so by engaging with the most recent research literature on youth studies concerning the agency/structure debate, which will be illustrated with results from a European project on youth participation. This literature will be discussed against the background of Hegelian philosophy, where it will be argued that structure is not as much a negative entity constraining people's lives but a necessary feature of agency. The article finishes with a short exploration of Greta Thunberg's political engagement, as an example of what universal politics could mean amidst a world permeated by identity politics.

Keywords Youth participation · Politics · Subjectivity · Hegel · Lacan

Introduction

In her book about the lives of young people in Britain, Georgia Gould, herself a young person and an active member of the British Labour party, suggests that "many young people no longer express their political beliefs in collective movements but in highly personal choices about how they live, where they work and consume" (2015, p. 4). This move is perceived by the author as an emancipatory one, which "should be celebrated and encouraged as the starting point of a new empowered citizenship" (p. 4). The shift from collective endeavours to choice and individual responsibility are the main characteristics of the post-1970 generation (Wyn and Woodman 2006; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Farthing 2010). In this new citizenship, people no longer rely on a strong state to delineate their participation, but are instead encouraged to individually pursue their own interests, independently and free from a broader

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collective commitment. This change is concomitant with the decline of the welfare state and public provision and with the emergency of voluntary and private services (in education, health and youth provision). In the field of youth, this restructuring of the welfare state has both provoked a disillusionment and powerlessness of those working in the field of youth work, but also provided a frame for groups to develop their activities within a logic of self-enhancement and entrepreneurship (Batsleer and Humphries 2000; Farthing 2010; Raby 2014; Walsh et al. 2018).

This move from collective engagement toward individualised choices stands for a broader change in cultural studies and social sciences (e.g. Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Bauman 2001) and is concomitant with the emergency of *identity politics* as the privileged mode of contemporary politics (Butler et al. 2000; Brown 2017; Fukuyama 2018). Identity politics is the form of politics that matches the decline of the welfare state as well as the progressive abandonment of theories that attempt to grasp society in its totality.[1] Instead of the metanarratives that dominated the scientific and political discourse in the past, in identity politics, we have a multiplicity of accounts concerning particular social groups and their political agendas. This political fragmentation is often perceived as an emancipatory step from the metanarratives of the past (Lyotard 1984), privileging instead the politics of different identities (sexual, racial, generational, etc.) and a plurality of struggles. Within this new political cosmos, emphasis is given to individuality and locality, wherein universal struggles and collective arrangements are often seen as deterrents of individual freedoms and agencies (Seidman 1994).

How are young people experiencing this decline in universal values in favour of individualised choices and local engagements? This article addresses this question in a twofold way: firstly, by critically engaging with research literature addressing the objective and subjective conditions influencing youth participation, and by problematising the most relevant conceptual frameworks wherein to situate and make sense of youth participation. Central to this discussion is the long-running dichotomy between *structure* and *agency* (e.g. Woodman 2009, 2010; Roberts 2010) when trying to understand and theorise the lives of young people, which connects with the debate around issues of *individualisation* (e.g. Farthing 2015) and *self-entrepreneurship* (e.g. Kelly 2006; Oinonen 2018).

Secondly, by exploring how young people internalise (or question), this pressure towards individualisation and the entrepreneurial ethos that encompasses it (Oinonen 2018). For this purpose, I take advantage of the data and analysis developed in a European project—PARTISPACE—which brought together researchers from eight European cities, with the aim of studying the different ways in which young people (aged 15 to 30 years old) engage with the public in formal, non-formal and informal settings and how is this supported or inhibited by local youth policies and youth work. Over the period of three years, researchers collected a significant amount of data through analysis of policy documents, expert, group and biographic interviews, and ethnographies and action research projects with groups of young people. Altogether, the project produced thousands of pages of data and analysis

[1] Most notably, Hegel's dialectics, Heidegger's hermeneutics and Marx's historical materialism.

reports of the ways in which young people are participating in the lives of eight European cities.[2] An initial exercise on data analysis was carried out in Batsleer et al (2017), which analysed the data from the local case studies developed in the eight European cities of the project. Important for us here will be the biographical analysis developed in this work, which aimed to understand how individuals identify collective and/or public forms of engagement as subjectively meaningful, what experiences they make and how this contributes to the shaping of their individual biographies.

For the purposes of our argument, we will focus on data and analysis that explores how young people are living the pressure towards individualisation, as well as the discontents and search for universality that encompass some of these life biographies. This material will be used to illustrate the theoretical discussion addressing the structure/agency dichotomy (Woodman 2009, 2010; Roberts 2010; Threadgold 2011; Coffey and Farrugia 2014; Kelly 2018). By reading these studies, one realises that, notwithstanding the divergent understandings of both terms and their relation, structure is invariably placed as the villain, and agency as the hero. I will not provide a review, or devote too much detail to the ground covered by Kelly (2014), and Coffey and Farrugia (2014) in their contribution to this debate. My purpose here is to question this dichotomy itself, not by offering a middle ground between the two (e.g. Evans 2002), but by positing them in their unity. That is, by positing structure as a necessary feature of agency. This move, I argue, allows us to better understand the role played by symbolic structures in enabling an agency beyond self-fulfilment and enjoyment.

For the readers of *Subjectivity*, the opposition between structure and agency may feel as a quite sociologically outdated way of thinking. The term "subjectivity" itself already denotes a disposition to move beyond this binary and to think of subjectivity as a non-dualistic process (Blackman et al. 2008, p. 20). However, there seems to be "a lack of non-dichotomous concepts and vocabularies for understanding processes of subject formation" (p. 19), and authors continue to employ in their analysis terms that rely on an overall opposition between some sort of personal disposition, agency, sense of self, resistance or autonomy, and the social setting or power relations that somehow curb the individual urge (Abrams 2015; Callaghan et al. 2016; Feltham and Clemens 2003; Häkli and Kallio 2017; Moon 2013). As posited by Feltham and Clemens (2003, p. 4, quoted in Blackman et al. 2008, p. 9), when referring to the work of Foucault, "[i]f the subject—right down to its most intimate desires, actions and thoughts—is constituted by power, then how can it be the source of independent resistance?" This problematic is at the centre of contemporary political philosophy, and articles in this journal have been exploring it through the mobilisation of the work of philosophers such as Badiou, Barad, Braidotti, Castoriadis, Deleuze, Lacan, Žižek, among others.[3] It is beyond the scope of this article to address the different

[2] Project's reports are available to download at http://partispace.eu/.

[3] Consider, for instance, the publications by Moon (2013), Vighi and Feldner (2010), Rekret (2016) and Bauchspies (2009). Some of this work not only addresses a particular philosophy, but contrasts and offers a colourful understanding of how different philosophies can complement or radically oppose one another.

debates and positions offered by this incredibly rich set of publications, though some of them will be later mobilised within the specific discussion developed here concerning the subject vis a vis the political (yet another way of framing the agency/structure debate). Important for us here is to highlight the importance of conceiving this duality not in fixed terms but as a *movement* (Massumi 2002, quoted in Blackman et al. 2008, p. 20). This will be done by eliciting elements from Hegelian philosophy and through an exploration of Lacan's notion of the master-signifier.

The work upon our selves

The field of youth studies has been prolific in research that analyses the process of *individualisation* (Beck 1992; Bauman 2001) that characterises late modernity, and its impact on the lives of young people. As explained by Woodman (2009), drawing on the work of Beck (1992, 2007), individualisation concerns the process of "disembodying of institutional boundary drawing at the level of collectives and re-embedding of this boundary drawing at the level of people in the singular" (p. 250). This "affective turn away from the institutional" (Walsh et al. 2018, p. 227), although it can be perceived by young people as offering more flexible options than those associated with centralised institutional power, it is nonetheless part of a tendency for states to individualise their relationship with young citizens (Farthing 2015). Individualisation is thus not simply a process of subjective preference or choice but results from an external pressure imposed on young people by institutional power (p. 1366). This *institutionalised* individualisation can be understood "as one of the multiple and overlapping logics that underpin the ongoing management of 'youth' and of young people" (p. 1367). This feature posits individualisation as part of a larger societal trend that addresses fundamental social problems as if they are the object of expert management and administration (Agamben 1998; Foucault 2008). Within this context, politics ceases to be a place where alternative emancipatory ways of living together can be thinkable and is transformed into a regulatory mechanism for the sake of the species' biological reproduction. Recognising this condition, Žižek (2012) argues that, today, we live in a *post-political* society: politics has surrendered to specialised social administration, targeting the bare life of the individual by controlling its fluctuations according to global standards of normality.

An important feature of the process of individualisation concerns the emphasis given to individual self-fulfilment, achievement and responsibility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, pp. 22–23, in Woodman 2010, p. 739). Within the individualisation ethos, individuals tend to assume individual guilt for any failings (failing to get a job, for not being healthy, failing to pay her or his debts, failing to be competitive and failing in school) (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Raby 2014; Woodman 2009). This leads Raby (2014) to affirm that youth participation deepens neo-liberal individualisation, and obfuscates structural inequalities "because the focus [of participation] is on individualised responsibility and autonomy" (p. 80). Failure to succeed is not justified in terms of a deficit in public provision, but as a moral fault where individuals are responsible for their previous errors and self-indulgence. This move towards individual responsibility is best described by what Kelly (2006) refers to as

the *entrepreneurial self*, which in turn is posited by Sukarieh and Tannock (2011) as part of a broader trend in youth studies and policies characterised by a *positive* approach to youth development.

Foucault's notion of the "entrepreneur-of-the-self" catches the change in governance and power relations characteristic of neoliberalism (Foucault 2008). It is no longer only disciplinary regimes (such as schools, the factory, the prison) or the biopolitical treatment of the population (by the welfare state) that are at stake in governing, but also, and perhaps more importantly today, the *self-governing* that individuals deploy on themselves, by constantly being pressured to optimise their capacities, skills, emotions, health and bodies (Rose 1996; Venn 2020). Within this logic, the "self" is seen as an investment. This new kind of work—as different from salaried work, for which the subject receives a wage in exchange for selling her or his work in the labour market—is no longer targeted towards an object (the object of a profession), but towards our own self (Žižek 2014, p. 43). This posits the ongoing interest in youth as part of a larger modern trend of "objectifying the self" (Dillabough 2009, p. 219), where young people are addressed as commodities that need to constantly seek for self-realisation, self-improvement and self-perfection (Walsh et al. 2018; Oinonen 2018).

What was previously seen as a formal right (to healthcare, to education, to housing, security and protection), is now seen as something that individuals have to win through self-investment on their selves. One becomes her or his own capitalist, free to invest in her or his own self in the same way a capitalist invests in this or that company. However, while the individual is pressured to optimise itself, it often lacks the conditions to do so. It must rely in a set of mechanisms and offers (student loans, house loans, private health and security) that turns him into what Lazzarato (2012) calls the "indebted man". In a way, each worker becomes 'his or her own capitalist, the "entrepreneur-of-the-self" who decides how much to invest in his or her own future (education, health and so forth), paying for these investments by becoming indebted' (Žižek 2014, p. 44). As a result, "[s]ince free choice is elevated into a supreme value, social control and domination can no longer appear as infringing the subject's freedom; it has to appear as (and be sustained by) the very self-experience of individuals as free" (p. 59). In education for instance, when we are deprived of universal and free schooling, we are told that we are given a new freedom of being able to choose the school that better fits our interests.

In some of the most affluent cities of the PARTISPACE project, young people reported being encouraged to "experiment with lifestyles, identity masks and affiliations" (Reutlinger et al. 2017, pp. 62, 63). The overabundance of opportunities that young people reveal in cities such as Frankfurt, Gothenburg and Zurich (Batsleer et al. 2017), is reported to lead to an identity uncertainty, with young people experimenting many different identities without never feeling satisfied, always shifting their interests without take them to an end. They complain about the constant pressure to be active, improving themselves through engagement with extra-school activities, participation through consumption and regret the lack of time for just chill out and do nothing (pp. 35, 36). The constant pressure to be active, to experiment different identities and to optimise themselves, instead of leading towards a new empowered citizenship, results in boredom, anxiety, lack of perseverance (p.

97) and lack of commitment (p. 98). These results question Woodman's (2010, p. 742) hypothesis that individualisation is most acutely experienced by working-class people. The overabundance of opportunities and choices, including identity choices, do not seem to alleviate the individualisation process of middle class people. On the contrary, it may exacerbate it.

The re-emergence of master-signifiers

This push towards individualisation, self-entrepreneurship and freedom to choose one's own identity, instead of leading towards self-realisation and emancipation, can be experienced as a source of anxiety and incompleteness (Verhaeghe 2006). One of the young students of Oinonen's (2018) study—on how the entrepreneurial discourse is internalised by university students—refers to the pressure to constantly improve and enhance herself as "the problem of our generation": "You can be anything you want so you have to force yourself to create your own personality. *It is pretty hard when you don't know for what.* I feel like a jelly: always flexible, not shaped, insecure (…)" (p. 9, my emphasis). This speech signals an important feature of identity politics: the lack of what Lacan (2007) calls a *master-signifier*, that is, a figure, a goal or an idea unifying a certain symbolic field, providing people with a frame of reference beyond their own narcissistic impetus. As expressed by the student above, it can be "pretty hard" when you do not know for what, ultimately, are you living for.

Gould (2015) who refers to "a proliferation of micro-communities and a reduction in the values that unite people across them" (p. 119) acknowledges this fact. The young people with whom she spoke with, refer to the need to have "universal ideas" (p. 145), beyond the immediate satisfaction of individualist needs. Recent research has also been indicative of this desire for collective, universalistic interventions, as a reaction against individualisation (e.g. Farthing 2015; France and Threadgold 2016; Woodman 2010). This feature was observed in some of the youth settings we studied during the project. There are young people for whom participation in a group is motivated by the search for a sense of belonging, for participating in something bigger than themselves (Batsleer et al. 2017, p. 103, 104). These young people are in a way calling for new masters that could provide a sense of universality, against the background of a secular age, which wrestles to provide a meaningful existence beyond egotistic goals. As expressed by France and Threadgold (2016), "if we are to avoid experiencing life as meaningless (and the existential terror that implies), we need to create meaning and then invest in those socially constructed meanings to make life bearable and worthwhile" (p. 623). On the other hand, while individualisation leads to "collective desynchronisation" (Woodman 2010, p. 739), it also leads to attempts to reassert collective identity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheinm 2002, p. 201, in Woodman 2009, p. 252). Although structure shapes people's lives, structures are fragmented, partial and sometimes contradictory. Consequently, a greater amount of effort is needed to synchronise features of life that have been compartmentalised, in a quest for new "contextual universals" (Beck 2009, p. 205, in Woodman 2010, p. 741) that can unite a certain symbolic field or give meaning to an individual life.

The struggle to define what master-signifiers will emerge as galvanising forces against individualisation is an open one. In our study, we identified groups of young people galvanised around political signifiers, commitment to sports (from football fans to parkour aficionados), religious signifiers, feminism, among others. Feminism, for instance, can offer a frame of reference, a "lens" to observe and criticise reality: "when I became independent and moved away from home, I realised I needed feminism to know what was right and wrong" (Batsleer et al. 2017, p. 111). Leo, a young man currently living in Manchester, explained in his biographical interview how the economic events that followed the 2008 financial crash played an important role in his life (p. 56, 57). He was 14 years old at the time and was confronted with the need to learn about political economy to understand what was going on. When he was 18 years old and came to Manchester to study, he knew he wanted to join some sort of political organisation. Similar biographies were also found in Rennes and in Plovdiv (p. 119). The same sort of *cognitive mapping* (Jameson 1991) can also be found in religion. Vanessa/Nassine is a young Italian woman converted to Islam. In her words,

> I chose Islam as a basis for reconstructing my life. Now I am Nassine and I have a blank page in front of me. Now when I wake up I know why I wake up. I know what I want and want I don't want to do in my life. (Batsleer et al. 2017, p. 114)[4]

Apropos of desecularisation, the past decade has seen a significant increase of interest in spirituality within youth development and participation (Benson et al. 2008, p.2, in Sukarieh and Tannock 2011, p. 685). According to Sukarieh and Tannock (2011, p. 685, 686), although not new, this resurgent interest in spirituality and religion is distinguished by two features: first because it forms part of a larger project of desecularising society and second because it is concomitant with the rise of neoliberalism and the decline of master-signifiers:

> The proliferation of interest in individual faith and spirituality, and growth of fundamentalist forms of Christianity and other religions in the context of neoliberalism has been widely noted, and interpreted as a response to growing social isolation, insecurity and instability, the erosion of the welfare state and the collapse of socialist political alternatives on the one hand, and the privatisation and commodification of religion on the other. (p. 689)

It is as if desecularisaton is compensating for the lack of universal secular tenets. Altogether, these sources of cognitive mapping—religion, politics and feminism—function as a uniting force creating communities where young people report being able to *forget about themselves* and experience a sense of universality (Batsleer et al.

[4] These cases illustrate instances of what Häkli & Kallio (2017) call *mundane political agency*: an agency located in the ways in which people take up issues that stand out as important to them and get entangled in a *state of becoming* (p. 12). According to the authors, an individual's confrontation with dilemmas or ambiguities in mundane situations can lead to a moment of *attentiveness*, pushing her or him away from everyday forms of agency, into a state where "the past and the future intersect in the form of a challenge, uncertainty, or conflict that demands their attention" (p. 12).

2017, p. 181–184). They function as master-signifiers, offering people a meaningful narrative for their lives, as well as a structure wherein they can participate in a substantial way.

Agency and structure in the field of youth studies

In the opposition between agency and structure, the master-signifier is on the side of structure. It is an entity that structures a symbolic field. However, our argument so far indicates that the master-signifier, far from being a negative entity, limiting agency, it can provide a meaningful frame wherein young people can enact their agencies. This "positive" feature of structure is often absent from this discussion. An analysis of the debate concerning the structure/agency dichotomy in the field of youth studies shows that, notwithstanding the attempts to play both concepts in unison, studies often fall into a hierarchy of value wherein agency is posited as a force that has the potential to resist or subvert the structural arrangements inhabited by people (e.g. Evans 2002; Farthing 2016; France and Threadgold 2016; Kelly 2018; Oinonen 2018). Ulrich Beck, for instance, is presented by Woodman (2010, p. 742) as someone who avoids "a binary form of conceptualising the active way people shapes their lives and the structures within which they do so", thus presenting a new theorising beyond what the authors call the "long-running structure/agency debates". Yet, as shown by Roberts (2010) and Threadgold (2011), Beck remains attached to this dichotomy, which is a recurrent feature in his theorisations. For Beck, structure is something individuals have become freer from (Beck et al. 1994, p. 177, in Roberts 2010, p. 138), where emphasis is given to the creation of an individual identity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, pp. 22–23, in Roberts 2010, p. 138). Human life is about either resisting structure or getting it to cohere (Woodman 2010, p. 742). While young people themselves might be aware of the role played by structures in framing their choice biographies, thus calling into question the hypothesis of an "epistemological fallacy" (Furlong and Cartmel 2007), structure (in this case presented as the welfare state) is nonetheless conceived in terms of a limitation or a barrier to young people's agencies (Farthing 2016, pp. 762–772).

On the other hand, attempts to bridge the conceptual disjuncture between agency and structure from a Bourdieusian perspective often go beyond a simplistic approach to this dichotomy by showing how "objective and subjective elements are *mutually* constituted, entangled both in people (habitus) and in social situations and institutions (fields)" (France and Threadgold 2016, p. 620). By complementing the work of Bourdieu with elements from environmental sciences and geography, France and Threadgold problematise the ontological dualism seeing agency and structure as separate entities and point towards more nuanced notions of reflexivity and consciousness than the ones present in the works of Margret Archer and Anthony Giddens. This is a major step forward in conceptualising the structure/agency dualism. Nonetheless, in the way France and Threadgold phrase the relation between processes and young people's decision-making, the use of words such as *shape* (p. 625), *influence* (p. 623), and *affect* (p. 621) to signify how the former relates with the latter, denotes a resistance to conceive the individual and the social in their unit. It

is not only that structure affects, shapes or influences agency. Agency becomes possible only against the background of a structured field, which, retrospectively, creates the field itself (Žižek 2012). The move I am advocating here is one that posits structure not only as a "negative" entity that affects, shapes or influences, but also, and perhaps more importantly, one that *enables* agency as such.

This argument parallels the one developed by Coffey and Farrugia (2014) in their poststructuralist framing of agency. They refer to the works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to argue how "power relations do not act as a constraint on a pre-existing agentic subject, but rather act as the conditions for the possibility of subjectivity" (p. 469). Within this frame, structure is a *positive* feature making subjectivity possible. The authors then introduce the Deleuzian concept of the *fold* and Barad's *intra-action* to explain how entities, such as agency and structure, do not precede their interaction, rather they are constituted as a result of their meeting. The encounter takes precedence over the poles of dualism. This move, the authors argue, allows us to go beyond dualisms (mind/body, structure/agency, material/representation). While this may be the case, the authors' wording seems to contradict their explicit intentions. Notwithstanding their attempt to go beyond dualisms, the way their argument is phrased continues to rely on dualisms, where instead of structure and agency we have bodies and the world, and the relations *between* them (p. 471): "the affective and intensive relations between the bodies and multiple other forces", "engagements between bodies and the world" (p. 471), and "we have identified to a subject's view of agency as the embodied potentiality to form intra-active relationships with material structures, discourses and intersubjective environments" (p. 472). How can the subject form intra-active relationships if the subject itself only emerges as an outcome of this encounter?

Hegel and subjectivity

At stake here is how we conceive that space of subjectivity that somehow allows for humans to retain some sort of autonomy (Häkli and Kallio 2017; Moon 2013), a space which has not been completely constituted by power (Feltham and Clemens2003, p. 4), without falling into approaches within social sciences which take for granted a self-centred subject and the givenness of the "I" (Venn 2020, p. 49).[5] Such problematic is one of this journal's concerns (Blackman et al. 2008, p. 1), and different special issues had been addressing it from different philosophical doctrines, including psychoanalysis (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2010) and posthumanism (Callus and Herbrechter 2012). It has also been extensively addressed in the work of Henriques et al (1998), through a discussion of the concept of *internalisation*. The authors develop a critique of this concept as it appears in psychology, particularly in the work of John Shotter. As explored by Henriques et al., in his attempt

[5] Though, as it will become clear in my exploration of Hegel, this way of posing the problem is already fallacious since presupposing the existence of such a space prevents us from positing *movement* as the core feature of the duality.

to emphasise the social formation of the infant's subjectivity, Shotter nonetheless fails to address the social in any form other than the personal (p. 16). Moreover, the dualistic relation between the individual and society that supports Shotter's conceptualisation,[6] "resurrects the Kantian duality of the knower and the known, a duality which is interminably difficult to transcend" (p. 17). Within this dualistic logic, "any attempt to resolve the problem must implicitly rely on the notion of a pregiven individual subject" (p. 17).

Alongside this work, the conceptualisation I am proposing is one that, more than establishing a *relation between* the poles of a dualism, it conceives them in their unit. As a relation, one still needs to presuppose the existence of two entities—agency/structure, bodies/worlds—that although inseparable, are distinct. They conserve some kind of autonomy, otherwise there will be no need to consider a "relation" between them. When Coffey and Farrugia say that agency "cannot be both an intrinsic property of human beings, and something acquired from the outside world, at the same time" (p. 465), they are overlooking the fundamental challenge to be addressed: to properly conceive these as one, as encompassing one in the other.

Such is the purpose of Hegel's speculative philosophy. While for understanding (*Verstand*)—as developed by Kant—each category and way of being is purely what it is and should not be confused with its opposite, in speculative philosophy (*Wissenschaft*), "something only is what it is in its limit and through its limit" (Hegel 2010, p. 148). It is of the very nature of things to become other; and in becoming other, they truly become what they are: "in its passing into another, something only comes together with itself" (p. 150). Something is inextricably bound up with the very otherness from which it differs. Agency is an intrinsic property of human beings precisely because it is inextricably bound up with structure.

Becoming is a key concept in Hegel's philosophy. In *The science of logic*—Hegel's attempt to produce a logical basis for science (including philosophy)—he spends the initial pages discussing *with what must the beginning of science be made?* He rejects starting from any determinate conception of what there is. Instead, the utterly indeterminate thought of pure being emerges as an initial point: "Pure being should mean nothing but being in general; being, and nothing else, without further determination and filling" (p. 47). It does not assume that being is a determinate object to which we relate; it rather adopts the minimal thought that being is, at least initially, indeterminate immediacy, lacking any quality, pure indeterminateness and emptiness.

However, things immediately get complicated, and what is taken to be the beginning of science—Being—immediately turns into its opposite, *nothing*. Being and nothing lack any determinacy upon which they could differ. Inasmuch as being, also nothing, pure nothingness, "is only actuality with itself, complete emptiness, complete absence of determination and content" (p. 59). Only nothing is not determined.

[6] Shotter's conceptualisation draws on G. H. Mead's theory of social construction of the self through internalisation of social conducts, and on Lev Vygotsky's emphasis on the formation of individual consciousness through the internationalisation of language and other social processes (Henriques et al, 1998, p. 14).

Being, conceptualised as the absence of any determinacy, ends up amounting to nothing. We have thus a speculative preposition, namely, that *being and nothing are the same*. This union of being and nothing will from now on "stand once and for all as foundation, as first truth, and will thus constitute the element of all that follows" (p. 60). Note that it is no longer Being that is the starting point of science, but the very union of being with its opposite, Nothing. This proposition is speculative because it contradicts itself the moment it is enunciated. How can being and nothing be the same if they are the opposite of each other? This contradiction leads Hegel to conclude that the truth is neither being nor nothing, but the *movement* (*Bewegung*) "of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other" (p. 60). In Hegel's words:

> The truth is neither being nor nothing, but rather that being has passed over into nothing and nothing into being. But the truth is just as much that they are not without distinction; it is rather that they are not the same, that they are absolutely distinct yet equally unseparated and inseparable, and that each immediately vanishes into its opposite. Their truth is therefore this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other: becoming, a movement in which the two are distinguished, but by a distinction which has just immediately dissolved itself. (pp. 59, 60)

When an attempt is made at fixing one of the terms, it immediately vanishes into its opposite, and this movement is their truth. Something becomes *an other* to itself, thus becoming its own immanent content.[7] Becoming is the restless vanishing of being and nothing into one another. Taken individually, being and nothing are just abstractions, lacking any actuality. It is only the movement of becoming that is actual.[8]

This is the minimal logic gesture that characterises so-called Hegel dialectics, and that Hegel applies again and again in his philosophical analysis of senses, consciousness, quantity, quality essence, number, finite, infinity, etc. From what has been argued before concerning the dichotomy agency/structure, it results that these entities have no actuality in themselves:

> their essence is purely and simply this: each is only through the other, and what each thus is it immediately no longer is since it is the other. They thereby

[7] By becoming something, something ceases to be what it is. Consider for instance someone who openly assumes he or she is an idiot. The moment someone assumes to be an idiot, it ceases to be one. The very gesture of assuming idiocy is non-idiotic. Hegel already noticed how language has the divine nature of directly reversing the meaning of what is said (2018, p. 66). With Lacan this property of language becomes its defining trace.

[8] It is worth noting the struggle of Hegel in developing the language to write movement. He uses expressions such as "self-externality" or "pure self-recognition is absolute otherness" to address the speculative nature of concepts, where interiority and exteriority are posited together in their difference. Writing fixes something into a determination, but this same something ceases to be the moment it is uttered. The question of "with what must the beginning of science be made?" is thus misleading. Any beginning taken as such immediately vanishes into its opposite. And this movement is their truth. To find a beginning for science falls into the same vain attempt of finding a beginning for a fractal.

> in fact have no substance of their own which would support and preserve them. (2018, p. 85, translation modified)

It is rather the movement of one vanishing into the other that is actual and important to consider. It is this actuality of movement that allows us to say that the moment a subject considers herself to be autonomous coincides with the moment of ideological capture—in this case, by the ideology of liberalism. On the other hand, a subject that gives herself away to *an other* opens a moment of agency.[9] It is moments like this that characterise the three examples of master-signifiers previously described. The gesture of forgetting about one selves and engage in what apparently are structurally alienating fields (that of politics, religion), was for the young people of our study a source a liberation, a moment for truly becoming themselves.

Conclusion: Having fun or ethical commitment?

The basic feature of postmodernity is that it tries to dispense with the agency of the master-signifier (Lacan 2007; Clemens and Grigg 2006; Tomšič 2015; Žižek 2014). To assert the "complexity" of the world has become an unconditional given, and every master-signifier meant to impose some order on it should be deconstructed, dispersed, and disseminated. While the authoritarian master is constituted on a vertical model of prohibition, with a clearly identifiable summit and an explicit message, the (post)modern master cannot be properly allocated in a particular person or institution but is instead universalised through constant bureaucratic rationalisation: the globalising logic of the market and procedures, where the mastering of people gives place to the administration of things. Instead of a meta-narrative organising a certain symbolic field, we have a proliferation of different narratives and identities, each one struggling for their own place in the social milieu.

On the other hand, the absence of a master-signifier means that there is no longer a dominant figure prohibiting us from enjoying our lives to the full. Instead, we tend to auto-regulate ourselves based on the knowledge provided by science, and popularised in social media (from self-help books to lifestyle magazines, from social networking services to online medical facilities). This logic of permissiveness and enlightened hedonism characterises late capitalism (Žižek 2014; Miller 2006). As explored by Žižek (2014), the suspension of the master-signifier leaves as the only agency of ideological interpellation the abyss of *jouissance* (Lacan 2007), or, in its anglicised form, *enjoyment*. For Lacan (2007), the ultimate injunction of late capitalist society is to *enjoy*. To live in a "society of enjoyment" (McGowan 2004) means

[9] A curious example of this speculative proposition is the experience that some writers report of losing their sense of identity when deeply engaged in writing. Instead of experiencing this losing themselves to the text as alienating, it is precisely on these moments that they feel more creative (consider for instance the essays by Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector (2012) on the nature of writing). Similar experiences have been reported by scientists (e.g. Louis de Broglie, quoted in Rosenblum and Kuttner (2011, p. 71), sportswomen (e.g. Ayrton Senna reflecting on driving his F1 car at Monaco), and religion (the concept of *revelation* is perhaps the most well documented experience of the sort).

that we not simply massively indulge in all sorts of enjoyment while neglecting or bypassing duties and responsibilities, but rather "in the sense that enjoyment itself has become our most prominent and inexorable duty" (Zupančič 2006, p. 169), to the point where one feels guilty for not enjoying (our professions, our families, our studies, our friends, our sexuality and our bodies.). As posited by Tomšič (2015, p. 227), "if God is dead, then jouissance is neither allowed nor prohibited but ordered and imposed".

When confronting Beck's work with middle-ground approaches to the agency/structure dualism, Woodman (2009, p. 252) raises the question of what exactly "unbounded agency" could mean. What does a full-length agency, free from structural constrains, look like? Against the background of our analysis, we can speculate how this "unbounded" agency is already at work and indeed characterises subjectivity in contemporary capitalist society. Unbounded agency means freedom from a master-signifier, which, as we seen, instead of resulting in a general sense of liberation, very often generates anxiety, discontent and a constant pressure to enjoy ourselves. It is not that "structure" as such disappears. It is rather that the explicitness of a structural arrangement—as it is presented in the discourse of the master—gives place to what Lacan (2007) calls the *university discourse*, characterised by knowledge production and bureaucratic procedures. The university discourse is not so much the discourse of science—aiming at the universal, the law, the thought and notion of a certain object—but a discourse that, although informed by scientific knowledge, assumes the form of protocols, regulations, ethical procedures, policy recommendations, as well as lifestyles, and norms of conduct and behaviour (Rose 1996; Venn 2020). The master becomes irreducible to concrete embodiments, inaccessible, invisible and abstract (Tomšič 2015, p. 215). Instead of disappearing, "structure" becomes omnipresent, but operating in disavowal of any master. It is as if the lack of a master-signifier generates a horizontal and widespread structural network of procedures, which individuals are asked to experience as liberating, while becoming increasingly subjugated to it. Instead of giving away the master, the university discourse operationalises an unassailable master, which presents itself as a mere servant of the people, guaranteeing equality and freedom for all.[10]

The quest for "unbounded agency" thus results in its opposite: an omnipresent (self-)regulation of life and a constant pressure to enjoy. When discussing young people's political participation, Farthing (2010) suggests that young people's turning away from politics should be fully appreciated, instead of condemned or embellished (p. 188). Using the work of Beck, the author advocates for an alternative vision of young people as *radically unpolitical*. This moving away from traditional, state politics is justified because young people are "navigating an entirely new form of society" (p. 188), turning to a new form of political participation based on self-actualisation or living your political ideology (p. 188). In the background lurks the

[10] These are the ideological conditions for the smooth functioning of the market (Marx, 1976). The liberal notion of the market as an invisible entity assuring that the common goods are fairly distributed along the human population does not rely on the presence of a master but is instead sustained by the belief that markets can auto-regulates themselves.

idea that through participation in a specific lifestyle young people are addressing global economic and political issues. Moreover, "kill-joy politics has no place in the lives of fun-loving young people" (p, 190), and Farthing suggests that "politics needs to remake itself as fun" (p. 191). As explored by Thrift (2005, p. 3, in Kelly 2018, p. 6), "capitalism is also fun", and "the routine, the mundane, the everyday is as important to the performativity of capitalism as the new, the inventive, the *sexy*" (Kelly 2018, p. 7).

Young people are shifting from traditional forms of political engagement (Gould 2015; Farthing 2010). However, the new spaces do not necessarily have to orbit around ones' identity in a logic of self-improvement (your carbon footprint, your consumerism) or indeed to be "fun". Young people, while absorbed in our consumeristic and self-centred society—no more than adults are– are also experiencing dissatisfaction with this same emphasis on identity. "What is the meaning of life a person should live for?" (Batsleer et al. 2017, p. 79) is a question that haunts us. The answer is not in ourselves; otherwise, we would have found it already. A master-signifier, a meaning for life, a cause, something to live for, liberates us from the constant pressure to focus on ourselves. It breaks with the narcissistic loop that seems to leave so many young people dissatisfied with their lives. What these new (or old) masters will be is an open question, and it may well turn out to be new forms of reactionary politics, instead of emancipatory ones.[11] In our study, we identify a plethora of such master figures, from politics to feminism and religion. However, as mentioned by Kunkel (2017, in Kelly 2018, p. 2) when discussing the predicaments of the Anthropocene, there are currently no collective agency capable of reckoning with the fact that the collective activity of humanity is shaping the ecological basis of the civilisation.

We started this article with the reference to a young leftist politician, Georgia Gould, and her advocacy for a youth participation based on the ideals of entrepreneurism (as opposed to collectivisation) and collaboration (instead of opposition and confrontation). Her speech is rich in liberal ideals, optimism and the so-called New Labour/ "big society" vision of the future (Bidisha 2015). While these continue to inform much of the ways in which a positive youth participation is understood (Sukarieh and Tannock 2011), other forms of engagement are also happening; forms that question liberal policies and posit change beyond the individual and the local.

I would like to finish this article with a short exploration of an example of such mode of participation—Greta Thunberg's ongoing struggle towards a global movement for action against climate change. In the last couple of years, Thunberg, a nineteen-year-old woman from Sweden, has been giving speeches, organising strikes and engaging with diverse forms of climate activism. By reading Thunberg's (2019) speeches, it becomes clear that for her politics have an edge that cannot be fully assimilated into a liberal ideal or be the politics of fun that Farthing suggests. It is rather, as Thunberg puts it, a matter of life and death. She

[11] Judging by the recent turn towards populism in the West, we can speculate how the increasing nationalist, anti-immigration and protectionist rhetoric is emerging as the new (old) master-signifier, as a reaction to the ethical vacuum that characterises cosmopolitanism and identity politics.

urges us to panic as if our house was on fire. We all seem to know that climate change is an existential threat, arguably the most important political, economic and social predicament of our era, nonetheless we act as if it was not. In our daily lives, we continue to behave as if the world as we know it will be here forever—and for those who have the right resources, it most likely will. Thunberg urges us to be scientific, and stop being cynical about climate change. She urges us to see things as black and white. She asks us to have "cathedral thinking" (p. 44):

> you wouldn't fly around the world in business class, chatting about how the market will solve everything with clever, small solutions to specific, isolated problems. You wouldn't talk about buying and building your way out of a crisis that has been created by buying and building things. (…) Our house is falling apart. (…) It will take cathedral thinking. (…) We must all do the seemingly impossible. (p. 49–54)

Demanding the impossible signals the instauration of a new master. And this is what Thunberg is urging us to do, to take our current climate predicament as a master-signifier around which to organise a common struggle. A master-signifier is here not a figure of prohibition, inhibiting us from exercising our autonomy and agency. It does not say "You cannot!" but is instead a figure that prompts action by confronting the individual with a powerful, yet frightening, command: "Yes, you can!".

We might agree or disagree with Thunberg's cause, and indeed question if climate change is the political signifier better tailored to address contemporary predicaments; but at least the master is in this case nameable and unashamedly assumed. Her straightforwardness and stubbornness have originated a set of responses that characterise postmodern positions. Some critics have mentioned that the situation is more complex, that we need a manifold approach, more time to devise and create new energetic alternatives, that the situation is not "black and white". Others criticise her for being too dogmatic, for refusing to see climate change from other angles, to have a softer approach to change so to speak. What these responses show is a rejection not so much of the content of Thunberg's message—most people recognise and accept climate change as a pressing challenge—but of the form in which it is enacted: inflexible, divisive, dogmatic and fully ethically committed. Thunberg decided to freely subdue herself to an ethical ideal, and this, for liberalism, is the "mother of all crimes, the crime which contains all crimes, for it amounts to the brutal imposition of one's own view onto others" (Žižek 2011). Thunberg's position is a polemic one; it forces us to take sides. This sort of position is usually seen as *fundamentalist*. But perhaps the meaning of this word needs to be rescued from the terrorist rhetoric in which it lives. Fundamentalist can also refer to the foundations or origins of something. And Thunberg's very clear in her message that something has to radically change at a fundamental level, not only in terms of ecology, but most importantly, as she acknowledges in her book, at a level of political economy. Against the free-floating identities and fluidity that characterises postmodernity, Thunberg's plea is a universal (and dogmatic) one. She wants us to universally participate in her, made ours, cause. Her mood is not a happy or funny one, but it rather connotes a state of weariness that, far from immobilising her, it spurs her into action.

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