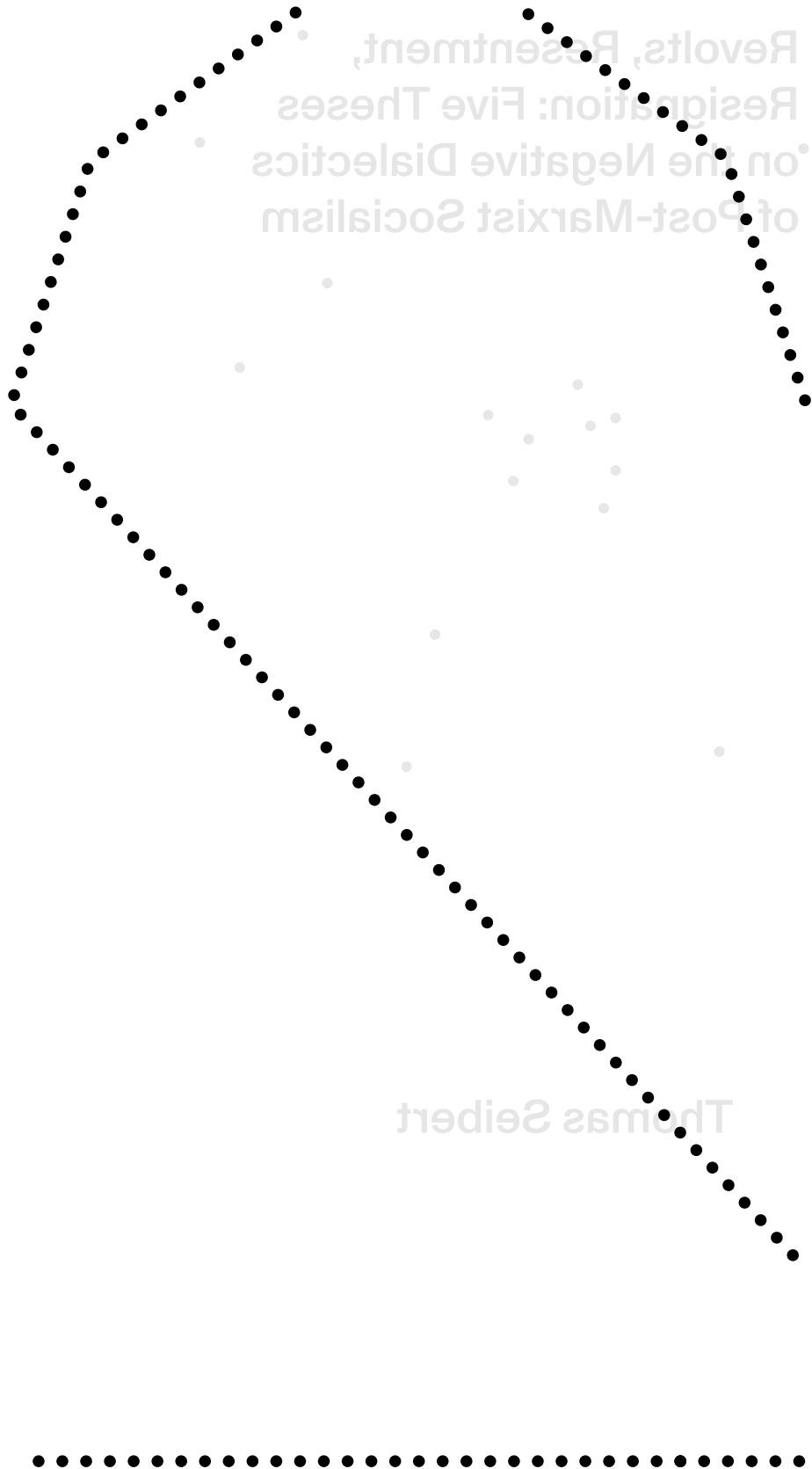


Revolts, Resentment, Resignation: Five Theses on the Negative Dialectics of Post-Marxist Socialism

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The following essay discusses to the Hamburg riot of July 7, 2017 and tries to understand it as an articulation of the mode of existence called “revolt.” It takes the riot as a borderline case of the political that is itself neither political nor nonpolitical: like many others, the Hamburg riot was the communication of a resistance to communication itself—that is, to society as such. The specific mission of the riot was precisely *not* to enter into negotiations, not even with the political Left. My five theses are preceded by a description of the Hamburg events.

0.

The context of the July riot was the summit of the G20 states, which took place on July 7–8, 2017, in the Hamburg Trade Fair and Congress Center. The summit was significant in three ways. First, it gathered representatives of the two opposing political tendencies in imperial politics. One tendency (represented by Trump, Putin, Erdoğan, and, mediating to the second tendency, Xi Jinping) seeks to solve the crisis of the neoliberal empire by returning to classic imperialist (that is, nation-state-centered) policies that internally stage themselves as policies of charismatic leadership. The other tendency (represented by Merkel and Macron) continues to hold onto an imperial course, but in this case, it is the imperial course of a multilaterally organized world order, “Empire.”¹ Second, the summit was significant in its failure: it could not solve the struggle of the two tendencies and thus became a symptom of the continuation of the crisis of Empire and the stagnation of all attempts at solution. Third, the meeting in Hamburg was significant because it was the first summit since Genoa in 2001 to take place in a big city and, especially, in a city with a strong Left and radical Left tradition. For example, the fairground where the rulers of Empire met borders directly on the Schanzenviertel, where the famous autonomous center Rote Flora is located.

0.1

In a survey of Hamburg residents in July 2017, 74 percent disapproved of hosting the summit in the city, 87 percent found costs far too high, and 73 percent did not expect relevant results; they were right.² The politico-police leadership of the city was prepared for one of the largest police operations in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. It occupied the city with 31,000 police officers and established a restricted area of thirty-eight square kilometers in which any political assembly was prohibited on the summit days. The area included reserved “red” and “yellow” zones; the first was reserved for summit participants and people entitled to access, the second for residents and post and care

● 1. I refer to the concept of Empire as developed by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri. The concept and the thing in itself are basically defined by the sentence “The problematic of Empire is determined in the first place by one simple fact: that there is world order.” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3. I myself would like to stress the point, already made by Hardt and Negri, that the imperial project is motivated not only by the necessity of governing the globalization of capitalist production but also by the politico-ideological need to govern a historical epoch pretending to realize the “end of history.”

● 2. *Hamburger Morgenpost*, July 6, 2017. For more information, see Karl-Heinz Dellwo, Achim Szepanski, and J. Paul Weiler, eds., *Riot: Was war da los in Hamburg? Theorie und Praxis der kollektiven Aktion* (Hamburg: Laika, 2018).

services. A third zone included the area around the Elbphilharmonie, where summit participants were to celebrate with a performance of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." A special prison for 400 prisoners with its own courtrooms was built to detain riotous persons. Already, in the run-up, massive warnings were issued about the arrival of protesters from Germany and abroad who were "willing to use violence."

0.2

The protests began on Sunday, July 2, with a demonstration of 10,000 participants organized by moderate NGOs. On the same day, however, the police—in an open breach of law—stopped the construction of an overnight camp. With the first police attacks came the first activist injuries. The day after, the politico-police leadership of the city was legitimized *ex post facto* by the Hamburg Administrative Court: the first submissive act by the judiciary. On Wednesday, July 5, artist protests followed; that evening and the following day, a "countersummit" with around 1,500 participants took place.

On the evening of the second day of the countersummit, the Rote Flora called for the demonstration G20: Welcome to Hell. At 7:00 p.m., 12,000 demonstrators gathered, including some 600 in masks. When they refused to remove their disguises, several hundred policemen with water cannons invaded the crowd shortly after the march started. It was obviously their aim not to arrest but to corporally punish riotous behavior. Nevertheless, the police were defeated. The brutally battered demonstrators reorganized a little later: relatively unhindered, 8,000 people moved to the Reeperbahn, and scattered groups burned cars and barricades, destroyed shop windows, and attacked police officers.

The police suffered its second defeat on the following day, Friday, July 7—the day of the blockades. Thousands of people were always three steps ahead of the police and their water cannons and scavengers, obstructing the trips of state guests, forcing them to take detours, and delaying the course of the summit. Violent clashes broke out in various places across the city, police vehicles burned, shop windows were broken. The police cleared streets with water cannons.

At 7:00 p.m., around 500 demonstrators in the Schanzenviertel district set up barricades, set fire to them, threw firecrackers, and armed themselves with iron bars. The police responded two hours later with action forces and water cannons on Schulterblatt, the core of the district. They used gas grenades and fired a warning shot but were then driven back by protesters throwing stones and bottles. Then special forces squads (SEKs) equipped with machine pistols entered the game—according to their commanders, they were given special permission to use the firearms for self-defense. At this point, what today is called the Hamburg riot began: shops were looted, cars were set on fire, and police officers were attacked and pelted with stones thrown from occupied houses. All this was done by a crowd numbering in the hundreds, composed mainly of migrant youth and activists from the autonomous, anarchist, and insurrectionist Left. Step by step, the SEKs cleared nine of the occupied houses, shooting rubber bullets at activists on the rooftops. All the while, police helicopters circled streets lit by their headlights, the noise of their rotor blades dominating the soundscape.



FIG01 — The performance *1000 GESTALTEN* was a form of creative protest in the context of G20 at Burchardtplatz, Hamburg, on July 5, 2017. Photograph by Miguel Ferraz

The following day, Saturday, July 8, more than 70,000 people marched to Millerntor without major incidents. Another clash took place in the Schanzenviertel in the evening; the police quickly brought it under control.

1.

I see the riot as an articulation of the mode of existence that I call “revolt.” The revolt encompasses much more than the riot, which marks its *collective inner turning point*. The revolt begins not with the riot but instead with the murderous game of *terror*, which is the most extreme articulation of revolt. In this ambiguity, the revolt today expresses what Hegel called “the life of the spirit,” which “shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation” but “endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself.”³

1.1

I start my little phenomenology of revolt with terrorism because the current world is best understood in light of the challenges terrorism creates. Abstracted from its empirical bonds to politico-ideological projects and economic interests, a terrorist attack is played out by (more or less) arbitrary individuals articulating their desire for the transcendence of the given world by threatening (more or less) arbitrary people with death at (more or less) arbitrary places. Self-empowering, they rely on nothing but a willingness to die and a desire to take as many others along as possible. Therefore, in its pure form, a terrorist attack resembles what the French writer André Gide called an *acte gratuit*, an act posed not against a specific social, economic, or political determination but against determinism as such.⁴ For us, then, to overcome terrorism means to search for radical, different ways to express that attitude.

1.2

However, the challenge of suicide bombing is deeply interwoven with its counterpart, the cybernetic upgraded anti-terrorism of the state, which tends to free itself from all legal restrictions. Anti-terror functions as the last point of convergence for neoliberal Empire pretending to rule the end of history. Proclaimed in the 1990s, the end of history and of its Empire has meanwhile lost (almost) all of its shine. Imperial power today is therefore limited to granting privileged subordinates exclusive protection against the horrors of post-history, especially the horrors of terror. Far more people are paying for anti-terror with their lives, with their injuries, and with the destruction of their goods than in all terrorist attacks put together.

1.3

Empire tries to govern an interconnected set of globally relevant processes of socialization. The first of these processes is the becoming worldwide of the world itself, for which the concept of globalization

stands. The priority of globalization is shown in the fact that all of the other processes of socialization are also processes of globalization. Continuing: the second process is the capitalization of the world, which in itself is (third) the process of our proletarianization. Both find their own place in (fourth) the urbanization of the world, through which the difference between city and countryside disappears. The driving force in all these processes is (fifth) the cyberneticization with which the world becomes a circuit of circuits. The common result is (sixth) the precarization of life in all its material and symbolic conditions. Globalization is then subjectively experienced through (seventh) the process of individualization. However, it does not make us unique, self-centered individuals; rather, it places us in a competitive position where we are forced to compare our behavior to that of others or, more precisely, to the average of their behavior. This is (eighth) the mediocrization that is sociologically realized in the hegemony of the global middle classes. The pull of the middle class also governs those who have no chance of belonging to it: the marginalized in all countries. They bear the expenses of the imperial way of life.

2.

These processes of globalization require imperial governance and governmentality because they are invariably processes of crisis: processes of the capitalist crisis, the crisis of work, the crisis of migration, and the ecological crisis. The crisis of capitalism lies in its inner vicious cycle, in which capital can only reproduce itself by reproducing its immanent negativity: class struggle. The question then is not to overcome class struggle but to turn it into capitalist reproduction: a turn that is never sufficient and therefore fuels capitalist crisis. The crisis of work lies in the fact that on the one hand, work under capitalist conditions promises a secure income and a coexistential recognition (and therefore integrates class struggle into capitalist reproduction); but on the other hand, it is available for fewer and fewer people. The ecological crisis forms the horizon of all other crises because it could render the earth as uninhabitable as the moon. The already tight deadline is shortening daily. These crises are currently performed in the crisis of migration, which, as the largest movement of people of all time and the frontline of class struggle, systematically deterritorializes people individualized on their own nothingness: the dispossessed of Empire.

2.1

The fact that the crisis processes of Empire are in themselves crises of individualization is manifest in the crisis of social relations, including the crisis of elementary relationships like friendship and love. This leads us directly into the crisis of the ethical and consequently the crisis of the political, which is not accidentally articulated in the double crisis of religion and secularity.

2.2

The double crisis of religion and secularity leads back to the crisis of terror and anti-terror, and thus to the coming out of each other and

● 3. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19.
 ● 4. André Gide, *The Vatican Cellars* (London: Penguin, 1976).



FIG02 – A police woman in front of Rote Flora after the police attacked the Welcome to Hell Demo overnight on July 6--7, 2017. Photograph by Miguel Ferraz

going into each other of all crises: the crisis of history.⁵ It lies in the fact that history has ended without being completed—that is, without having fulfilled the promises that enable us to speak of a singular history and of a possible end of history. The clearest symptom of the crisis of history lies in the flippancy with which it is shrugged off.

2.3

In fact, Empire is called Empire because it knows no boundary, no outside, and no other: “There is no alternative!” Seen from the Western

5. For a systematic philosophical investigation into the crisis of history, see Thomas Seibert, *Zur Ökologie der Existenz: Freiheit, Gleichheit, Umwelt* (Hamburg: Laika, 2017).

theological-metaphysical tradition, Empire therefore is immanence in itself, an interior without exterior that tries to erase every trace of transcendence. For that very reason, and this is the all-important point, Empire (at least at this point of its own history) has found its main challenge in terrorism. Based on this idea, terror is the only transcendence left over: the transition from a self-contained inner to an outer, which is a mere vain nothingness. Terror is revolt in the form of active nihilism. This is the reason that the crisis is not terrorism for the sake of fundamentalism but the other way around: fundamentalism is simply for the sake of terrorism.

3.

Terror, as the transcendence of last resort, also retains a last vestige of the transcendental event, in which for Hegel (though not only for Hegel) the purposeless becoming becomes “world history” in its true meaning: the life-and-death struggle for recognition. Hegel calls it a “struggle for recognition” because its fighters try to communicate their own freedom to each other and thereby try to achieve their recognition as free beings.⁶ Only with the risk of death do the fighters prove that they can detach themselves from the natural compulsion of self-preservation and, thus, from mere life in order to affirm themselves as free. It is this existential detachment from the compulsion to self-preservation, in its pure meta-ethical sense, that is perverted by today’s terrorists.

The dilemma at the bottom of Hegel’s reconstruction of history’s first struggle lies in the fact that one of the two combatants evades this existential probation and, for the sake of survival, becomes a servant of the other. From this constellation, world history receives its tendency, its inner drive—of course, not in the sense of an empirical cause but in the sense of the logical starting point for the philosophical reconstruction of history’s bloody ups and downs. Exactly in this sense, the constellation itself is to be found in all kinds of social struggles, not only in class struggle but also in all kinds of power relations, those based on class as well as those based on gender, ethnicity, or race. In all of these cases, we have to understand that freedom always provides the possibility of self-neglect, which itself is an act of freedom. All history, and therefore all society, is always a history and society of voluntary bondage or voluntary servitude. This is the scandal in which the revolt reignites, in which the revolt and thus the riot find their own morality.

3.1

In fact, the relationship between domination and bondage is unsatisfactory for all participants. The survival of servants depends only on the arbitrariness of their masters. The masters themselves have gained recognition by their servants, but it is a worthless recognition—simply because it is given only by a servant. While the masters have only their readiness for death, the servants are aware of their opportunity for freedom through self-mastery and world domination achieved by their work. Thus their struggles, however confused, become “political” struggles in the eminent sense of the term: struggles of world history.

6. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 104–111.

For Hegel, the French Revolution marks the sublation of this drama: the killing of the king is the overcoming of the master and therein the end of the story—that is, the end of the dialectic of domination and bondage. This is where Marx and Nietzsche, Hegel’s most important critics, come in.

3.2

Marx criticizes bourgeois society from the perspective of collective practice and recognizes in its capitalist form a specific alienation, one that the servant is able to remove dialectically. Nietzsche goes a step further. For him, the societies of the free and equal, politically and philosophically legitimized by Hegel and Marx, are in truth only societies of servants without masters. He works out his criticism from the perspective of singular existence and recognizes in its proletarian-bourgeois form not only a specific but also a generic alienation. By this he means an alienation that cannot be sublated dialectically and therefore remains the medium of existential revolt—in other words, a revolt that even in its plurality remains the singular revolt of an individual.

Marx and Nietzsche became the main proponents of widely endorsed lines of criticism. Marx’s line is called “social criticism” and politicizes (in addition to class alienation) many other alienations, especially those of gender and generation; of ethnic, racial, and linguistic origin; and of sexual and spiritual orientation. Nietzsche’s line is called “artists’ criticism” because it takes the purposeless expenditure of art as *pars pro toto* for the freedom of existence.⁷ Early on, these two lines of criticism disputed over the demarcations between specific and generic alienation. In this sense, it is no coincidence that now three voices of the Surrealist movement have their say: to this day, this disagreement is one of the decisive forces in the mediation between social and artistic criticism.

3.3

Nietzsche has also taught us to recognize the historically most powerful force of revolt and its great danger, which he has called the “spirit of revenge”: those who revolt take first and for the most part revenge on those whom they rightly and wrongfully hold responsible for their misery. The revenge is not only directed toward the masters or to competing servants but also applies to the whole of life and the earth. This connects the revolt to work as the mode of existence that today devastates all of our lives and our entire world. Artists’ criticism following Nietzsche then showed that revenge feeds on at least three

basic existential “*Befindlichkeiten*”: fear, disgust, and boredom.⁸ These basic conditions reflect our specific as well as our generic alienation, above all the alienation that results from our condemnation to death, to desire, and to violence. Today fear, disgust, and anxiety are the basic conditions of the servants without masters and their imperial way of life; they are therefore more powerful than ever before in history. As such, they include, of course, more concrete societal *Befindlichkeiten*, such as the feelings of injustice or exclusion.

From these feelings, it is also understandable why terror and revolt are not specific to a particular religion but symbolically legitimize themselves through nationalism, racism, sexism, and from certain socialisms, as well as from struggles for survival that have escalated into open violence. However, fear, disgust, and boredom also explain why the revolt can exist without any legitimacy, as is the case of a rampage or a suicide: they too are more common today than ever before. Still, they explain how and why revenge is associated with its adversary, imperiousness.

4.

Like the terror, rampage, and suicide, the riot also belongs to the revolt. It finds its classic formulation in the famous “pistol phrase” of André Breton:

The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can, pull the trigger into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level.⁹

The riot becomes the collective *inner turning point of revolt* because and when social and artistic criticism come together and mutually criticize each other. During the looting in the Hamburg riot, this is clear in the case of the stolen flat-screen TVs. While some rioters—with a kind of sociocritical perspective—recognized the TVs as a good to acquire, others threw them directly into the fire as—from the perspective of artistic criticism—an obstacle to their transcendence beyond the actual existing world. This shows what possibilities the politics of the riot opens up as a borderline case of the political. Most recently, this potential is visible in the Arab Spring, in certain moments of revolts in southern Europe, and currently in a growing number of countries like Algeria, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Chile, or Haiti.

● 7. The concepts of “social criticism” and “artists’ criticism” and the difference between “specific” and “generic alienation” have been developed by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their fundamental study *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2018). Their main thesis is that the world historical meaning of the May 1968 revolution lies in the way this revolution mediates between these two forms of criticism, and that the neoliberal counterrevolution therefore has to be understood as a reintegration of the specific achievements of this constellation into capitalist reproduction.

● 8. The meaning of the German term *Befindlichkeit*, philosophically enumerated by Martin Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*, unfortunately is not preserved in its English translation “mental state,” because it also contains the meaning of *sich befinden in* (to be located in) through which “*Befindlichkeit*” becomes a basic element of existence—that is, as “being-in-the-world.” Unfortunately, the term “state of mind” is used in the English translation of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1964; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

● 9. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 125.



FIG03 – Sentiments escalate at Pferdemarkt after the police advance with water cannons on Budapester Straße. On July 7, 2017, the Schanze became the center of the riots. Photograph by Miguel Ferraz

4.1

Of course, the riot is also led by resentment and, of course, it is also primed by fear, disgust, and boredom. That is why we cannot stop at the riot. This was clearly demonstrated by the Chemnitz riot that began on August 26, 2018, the political counterpoint to the Hamburg riot. On this and the following days, young and socially marginalized Germans repeatedly attacked migrants resident in the city. As in Hamburg, the police were initially unable to stop the violence. Of course, the Chemnitz riot was as clearly on the political right in its social composition and orientation as the Hamburg riot was clearly on the left: this difference is crucial. There are further meaningful differences as well—for example, the different attitudes toward the use of violence: the violence was against marginalized subjects in the case of Chemnitz and against the armed forces of state power in the case of Hamburg. Phenomenologically, however, the Chemnitz riot cannot be reduced to its political coding, because it too not only attacks particular social relationships but also acts against being-related-in-society as such. We can fix this phenomenological ambiguity in three theses:

1. Like rampages and suicide, riot and terror in their pure forms are articulations of an existential revolt against specific and, more importantly, generic alienation.

2. Taken politically, specific riots can be associated with the Right (e.g., Chemnitz) and the Left (e.g., Hamburg). The reason for this is that one of the main *Befindlichkeiten* motivating riots is to be found in resentment (“spirit of revenge”).

3. Whereas terror in its pure form is neither on the right nor on the left, taken politically, terror is always on the right, even if its protagonists understand themselves as leftists. But armed, or at least violent, struggles identified by state actors as “terrorist acts” need not be acts of “terrorism.”

Again, we owe the decisive verdict to Surrealism, this time the group *Le Grand Jeu* (the Great Game) and its eponymous magazine.¹⁰ It passionately calls for rioting—and at the same time calls for a resignation from revolt. Thereby, *Le Grand Jeu* understands resignation not as an act of abandonment or pacification but as an existential attitude in which revolt is bracketed and henceforth on the go: as a possibility for

● 10. Robert Gilbert-Lecomte, Maurice Henry, and René Daumal, *Theory of the Great Game: Writings from Le Grand Jeu Magazine* (London: Atlas, 2015).

existence to be worked out anytime in and as an act of freedom. In order to make this existential attitude come to life, the Surrealists of Le Grand Jeu joined the revolutionary workers' movement of their time and so mediated artistic and social criticism—without letting go of their revolt against the generic alienation, which revolution can change only a little.

4.2

As with the other Surrealists, the alliance of Le Grand Jeu and communism did not last. Nevertheless, we owe another Surrealist, Georges Bataille, for the first reference to another, post-Marxist mediation of social and artistic criticism. For Bataille, socialism was not the end of history and therefore was not the abolition of alienation, but instead was a way to purge the revolt of revenge as well as of imperiousness. His reasoning is as simple as it is striking, empirically problematic yet logically consistent: since fully developed socialism liberates the existential transcendence that he calls “sovereignty” from all forms of hierarchies, the competition for positions of power and property (and the drives for revenge and imperiousness that stem from it) will cease to be politically influential. Of course, the revolt then would not be pacified. But it would now be possible to articulate itself alone in poetry or, perhaps, in beauty. Bataille writes:

It is less about works in which this beauty could take shape; rather, it is about a force that must possess, who does not want to be separated from this beauty for a moment. And further: provided that the few who are concerned will have the consciousness of this force, chaos and dissonance, of the scale of a world, will not cease to quench the thirst that will plague humanity forever.¹¹

4.3

If the riot has its limit in a shooting star, which shines forth to disappear again in the dark, we must make possible—through reform, reformation, and revolution—a socialism in which riot and revolt can permanently be renewed. It would be a negative-dialectical socialism, in which social criticism and praxis act as an interim that again and again gives way to the primacy of artists' criticism and existence.

5.

The deadline to achieve this socialism is tight. If the clock runs down, the revolt will be as lonely as ever. This does not change anything about its nonnegotiability. On the contrary, the riot would communicate the nonnegotiable. It would offer the power of instantaneous debinding from the present (that is, from voluntary servitude), and it would be the force of anticipation for a real end to history—the anticipation of (not only) Nietzsche's dream of an innocence of becoming in which we could finally abandon history. To be after the end of history is to be before the end of history.

● 11. Georges Bataille, *Die Souveränität* (Munich: Mattse and Seitz, 1978), 86 (my translation).