

ALIENOCENE – DIS-JUNCTION

LIFE AND PRISON



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In his inaugural lecture for the opening of the Chair of Semiology at le Collège de France in Paris (1977), Roland Barthes made a strange and striking statement: language is fascist:

“Language is legislation, speech is its code. We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and that all classifications are oppressive ... Jakobson has shown that a speech-system is defined less by what it permits us to say than by what it compels us to say. In French (I shall take obvious examples) I am obliged to posit myself first as subject before stating the action which will henceforth be no more than my attribute: what I do is merely the consequence and consecution of what I am. In the same way, I must always choose between masculine and feminine, for the neuter and the dual are forbidden me ... Thus, by its very structure my language implies an inevitable relation of alienation. To speak, and, with even greater reason, to utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate: the whole language is a generalized *rection* ... Language—the performance of a language system—is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech.”ⁱ

The problem of course is that there is no way to escape language, there is no way out. For Barthes, “Unfortunately, human language has no exterior: there is no exit.”ⁱⁱ We then have to do with the prison-house of language, then, as Jameson says.ⁱⁱⁱ

This entrapment in language is even more conspicuous when it comes to philosophical concepts. Let’s look at the etymology of the word *concept*, at least in French and in English. It stems from *concupere*, which itself comes from *capere cum*, ‘to grasp together.’ The term *concept*, then, originates in captivity.

According to the dictionary, *captive* as an adjective from the late 14th century means ‘imprisoned, enslaved,’ from Latin *captivus* meaning ‘caught, taken prisoner,’ from *captus*, past participle of *capere* meaning ‘to take, hold, seize,’ from PIE root *kap- or ‘to grasp’ (see *capable*). As an

Old English noun from c. 1400; the word for captive was *hæftling*, from *hæft* meaning ‘taken, seized’.” The term prison also derives from the act of seizing, or *prendre* in French (*action d’appréhender au corps* meaning ‘to arrest’), from Latin *pre(n)siōnem*, meaning ‘a taking’, that became *preison*, then *prison*. In German, the verb *greifen*, that we hear in *begriff* (*concept*) signifies: to capture someone.

It seems, then, that philosophy is doomed to redouble the fascism of language.

I want to link these preliminary remarks with the fact that the most important and profound contemporary philosophical texts devoted to the issue of life always or practically always comprise, in their very center, their very core, a reflection on prison, on what it is to live in prison. As if life itself was the privileged victim of philosophical concepts, as well as the privileged victim of language. Of language’s fascism.

Let me list some of the important texts which provide us with a reflection on concept, language, captivity and life: *Captivity Notebooks* by Emmanuel Levinas, *Marx* by Michel Henry, *Discipline and Punish* by Foucault, *Homo Sacer* by Agamben. I will refer here to Michel Hardt’s article “Prison Time,” devoted to Jean Genet in order to expose 1) how philosophers generally account for the relationship between life and imprisonment and 2) how they explore the possibility of a way out from within language.

I will then question the way in which the traditional philosophical approach to both language and captivity has been challenged by Black thinkers like Martin Luther King (I will refer to his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”) and Frank Wilderson, from the perspective of Afro-Pessimism.

In his article “Prison time,”^{iv} Michael Hardt develops a very interesting metaphorical crossing between actual prison and the prison of language. He situates in parallel the fact of being in jail and being trapped within language. Genet’s life is, of course, the incorporation of such a merging.

Hardt writes: “Inmates live prison as an exile from life, or, rather, from the time of life.” They think: “The first thing I’ll do when I get out is … Then I’ll really be living.”^v

Captivity produces the fantasy of an outside: authentic life is *outside*. Outside walls, we might add outside concepts, and outside language.

But Hardt shows that this fantasy disappears when one discovers at the same time, as we saw a moment ago with Barthes, that there is no outside. That the outside of prison in fact does not liberate life from its capture.

“Those who are free, outside of prison looking in, might imagine their own freedom defined and reinforced in opposition to prison time. When you get close to prison, however, you realize that it is not really a site of exclusion, separate from society, but rather a focal point, the sight of the highest concentration of a logic of power that is generally diffused throughout the world. Prison is our society in its most realized form. That is why, when you come into contact with the existential question and ontological preoccupations of inmates, you cannot but doubt the quality of your own existence. If I am living that elsewhere of full being that inmates dream of, is my time really so full? Is my life really not wasted? My life too is structured through disciplinary regimes, my days move on with a mechanical repetitiveness — work, commute, tv, sleep … I live prison time in our free society, exiled from living.”^{vi}

So in a certain sense, life in prison just reveals life as prison. My life outside is a prison, my life as a free subject is a prison. Because I speak. Because I am a speaking subject. Being a speaking subject in the prison of language paradoxically brings me close to those who don’t speak to animals, animals in captivity, when they develop what is called stereotypic behaviors, made of repetition and routine.^{vii}

In fact, what Hardt describes when he says that prison is everywhere, that our lives are always already captured by power, is the series of stereotypes in which we are always already locked in: these repetitions, habits, routines and manifestations of meaninglessness that first appear in language, and are redoubled by philosophy.

Barthes also characterizes the originary imbrication of power and language as what gives way to the production of stereotypes. He declares:

“The sign is a follower, gregarious; in each sign sleeps that monster: a stereotype. I can speak only by picking up what *loiters* around in speech. Once I speak, these two categories unite in me; I am both master and slave. I am not content to repeat what has been said, to settle comfortably in the servitude of signs: I speak, I affirm, I assert *tellingly* what I repeat. In speech, then, servility and power are inescapably intermingled.”^{viii}

Philosophy usually radicalizes such a situation by affirming that captivity is not a specific state or mode of being among others, but constitutes the very form of being in the world. This means that power would not only be the external force that subdues life and captures it, but what also exploits a virtuality of life itself, something immanent to life itself. Stereotypic behaviors would then reveal a potentiality of life, something that is always already present in life.

The specific task of traditional philosophy is to affirm that instead of trying to escape the closure of concepts, we have to first accept it, and to acknowledge the essential complicity between the closure of concepts and the captivity of life. It is the task of philosophy to understand captivity as internal to life. Philosophy, as Plato so powerfully demonstrates with the cave, starts in prison.

Philosophy wants us to think that there exists something within life that constitutes its own tendency to imprison itself. Heidegger, in his book *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, written at a time when he still talked about life and not yet of existence, brings to light the category of *Abriegelung* (sequestration), containing *riegel* meaning ‘lock’ in German and meaning ‘blocking-off’ in English, ‘*verrouillage*’ in French.^{ix} Blocking-off is the prefiguration of what will be called in *Being and Time* the taking care, the inauthentic version of care. It is a form of closure, of *Benommenheit*. Life necessarily imprisons itself, and the lock is an essential structure of life.

Abriegelung comes from the fact that life has a tendency to “miss” itself, to remain blind about its ontological determination. It encloses itself in stereotypes because it does not see what it really is. “Life does its utmost to mistake itself for something else,” Heidegger writes. For example, life tends to “miss” the fact that it is finite. It misses that fact like a shot misses its target, blinds itself, puts out its own eyes. In *Abriegelung*, life leaves itself out ... Factual life leaves itself out precisely in defending itself explicitly and positively against itself ... Let’s us first ask why “life” needs to “defend itself against itself.”^x The lock, the *riegel*, coincides with life’s immediate understanding of itself. It is a misunderstanding because of the language used to describe such an understanding: life appears as something that is ahead of me, as a free space. In stating this, it precisely locks itself out. It misses the authentic opening, which is the opening toward death. Life is imprisoned because of its disavowing of its own death!

For a long time, in the philosophical tradition, it is the concept of alienation that has been used to designate this originary captivity of life. In Michel Henry’s *Marx*,^{xi} one finds an analysis of what Henry calls subjective alienation, as distinct of course from objective alienation. Henry’s fundamental thesis is that Marx’s main concern is life – life understood in its most material, empirical determination.

In Hegel, Henry explains, alienation characterizes a becoming object. For example, if I say that my life is alienated it means, in a Hegelian sense, that my life has become a thing. It is true that labor, for Marx, is what transforms life into a commodity. The problem is that the worker’s life is at the same time inseparable from him, so what he alienates is something that is definitely subjective, something that he or she cannot depart from without dying. Labor is a subjective alienation, the selling of something that cannot become an object: “If alienating oneself does not mean to objectify oneself any longer, to posit oneself in front of oneself as something which is there, alienation then occurs within the very sphere of subjectivity, it is a modality of life and it belongs to it ... [alienation is] “a specific tonality of life, when life means suffering, sacrifice ... What is the most proper becomes the most alien.”^{xii} But in Henry as well, social alienation

comes from an immanent tendency of life. Life is always already alienated, imprisoned. But yet it does not have the words to express that. Here, again, the first prison is language.

Ambiguity of philosophy roots alienation or *Abrigelung* within life itself.

We now have to see how philosophers think possible to de-alienate life. Conceptually, this amounts to attempting to elucidate the issue of the outside where there is no outside.

Hardt affirms that Genet succeeded in carving out a space of freedom within captivity. Genet was able to build an outside from inside the prison, an outside which that was not an elsewhere:

“The fullness of being in Genet begins with the fact that he never seeks an essence elsewhere — being resides only and immediately in our existence ... Exposure to the world is not the search for an essence elsewhere, but the full dwelling in this world, the belief in this world.” Hardt explains that prison is still a world, and being captive a modality of exposure to the world. And it is from the experience of prison, when we learn how to dwell in prison, that we can get out of it. “When we expose ourselves to the force of things we realize this ontological condition, the immanence of being in existence. We merge with the destiny we are living and are swept along in its powerful flux.”^{xiii}

The important term here is “immanence,” which precisely means “inside.” Within immanence lies the possibility of transcendence. One form this transcendence might take it that of writing. For Genet, writing positions him at one with the living bodies of the prisoners: “in this exposure the bodies are fully realized and they shine in all their gestures.”^{xiv} This gain in intensity inside is what Hardt calls the saintly, divine, sublime passivity of being in prison. Writing, Heidegger would say thinking. A certain use of language that emancipate the writing or thinking subject from stereotypes.

It would be interesting to develop here the Spinozist, Nietzschean and Deleuzian vocabulary that Hardt uses to characterize how Genet increases

his power of acting, how life becomes joy, affirmation, creation, in the “energy of erotic exposure” of captive life.

This transcendence in immanence is not only an artistic or erotic gesture though, it is a revolutionary gesture. Hardt begins his article with these words: “Lenin liked to think of prison as a university for revolutionaries.”^{xv} Furthermore, “exposure itself, however, is not enough for Genet.”^{xvi} Exposure has to transmute itself into the revolutionary event. Instead of getting out, into the outside, the externality comes from a reversion from within. Writing is an enduring movement that inverts directions:

“Revolution is defined by the continuous movement of a constituent power ... Revolutionary time finally marks our escape from prison time into a full mode of living, unforeseeable, exposed, open to desire. This mode of living is at all times constituent of our new, revolutionary time.”^{xvii}

The redemption of prison space has to first happen within prison itself. We remember the thesis defended by Hardt and Negri in *Multitudes*, that prison time characterizes the situation of the global proletariat, the carceral mode of living imposed upon it by globalization. We find here again the point made by Henry about subjective alienation and the cutting in two of life by capitalist exploitation of labor. The revolution to come appears first as a revolution of language, in language. Barthes again: “But for us, who are neither knights of faith nor supermen, the only remaining alternative is, if I may say so, to cheat with speech, to cheat speech. This salutary trickery, this evasion, this grand imposture which allows us to understand speech *outside the bounds of power*, in the splendor of a permanent revolution of language, I for one call *literature*.”^{xviii}

Revolution starts with an upheaval of language, an event that keeps language “alive.” Such an operation coincides with Hardt and Negri’s “liberation of living labor,” the counterpower to the “Empire seen as a mere apparatus of capture that lives off the vitality of the multitude.”^{xix}

Through revolution, life does not definitely lose its capacity to be captured, its essential relationship to exile, closure and separation. The

originary passivity of life can always be exploited and subjugated by revolution itself. Therefore, there is no clear and univocal meaning of the way out.

What does the outside look like, then? Again, this question is very difficult, and this is where the analysis takes another direction and walks on another path. The outside of prison through revolution consists mostly in the transformation of the social jail into the emancipated community, the building and fashioning of the commune, and the construction of networks of interrelationality. Through these networks, life in a certain sense is returning to itself, is restituted to itself. But this interrelationality, in its turn can be considered a new prison. As Martin Luther King, in “Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that changed a Nation,” affirms:

“In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.”^{xx}

These words certainly describe something like the universal condition of life, what all men share, caught as they are in the same net. The “inescapable network” may be considered the origin of freedom, in the same way that Sartre said that men are doomed, or destined to be free.

However, these words can also be read as announcing a new mode of being locked in, within the community and the revolutionary acting out themselves. Because in reality, the network formed by humanity, even if interrelated, is a mechanism of exclusion. IN jail in jail. Double imprisonment of Black people.

In his book *Red, White, Black, Cinema and the Structure of U.S Antagonisms*,^{xxi} Frank Wilderson proposes an interpretation of Hardt’s text from the point of view of Afro-Pessimism. From that specific point of view, Hardt’s analysis acts like another lock and a new modality of separation. Hardt’s discourse of revolution “assumes a universal grammar

of suffering,” Wilderson writes, that does not exist. There is no universal grammar of prison, and all concept of imprisonment, all concepts of life itself, necessarily preclude Blackness. “Black time is the moment of no time at all on the map of no place at all.”^{xxii} This means that the duality inside/outside cannot apply to Blackness. The slave, who for Wilderson, is the fundamental identity of Black being, is not a prisoner, but a slave, that is a non-being, a life that is not one. “Marxist ... ontolog(ies) either take for granted or insist on ... the a priori nature of the subject’s capacity to be alienated and exploited.”^{xxiii} Revolution itself is a concept, and therefore is also a capture: “One cannot think loss and redemption through Blackness, as one can think them through the proletarian multitude or the female body, because Blackness recalls nothing prior to the devastation that defines it.”^{xxiv} Furthermore, “Blackness exists on a lateral plane where it is possible to rank human with animal.”^{xxv} For Afro-pessimists, the Black subject is exiled from the *human relation*, which is predicated on social recognition, volition, subjecthood, and the valuation of life itself. Thus Black existence is marked as an ontological *absence*, posited as sentient object and devoid of any positive relationality, in contradistinction to the human subject’s presence.

In a certain sense, white live is constructed upon Black death, and Black lives are Black deaths.

In fact, philosophy and literature never take into account lives that are excluded by the concept or the immanent passion of the word. When Wilderson affirms that Blackness is ranked with animal life, it is to the extent that means animal life itself is excluded from the concept, and that Black lives and animal lives are both reduced to pure stereotypes.

The name of the international activist movement “Black Lives Matter,” created in July of 2013, raised many reactions. The U.S. population’s perception of Black Lives Matter varies considerably by race. The phrase “All Lives Matter” sprang up as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement. However, “All Lives Matter” has been criticized for dismissing or misunderstanding the message of “Black Lives Matter.” Following the

shooting of two police officers in Ferguson, the hashtag “Blue Lives Matter” was created by supporters of the police.

We can see then through this example that life, whatever its definition, seems to always fall back into ghetto, prison, separation and fragmentation. Blackness is the most obvious case of the impossibility to open a space of freedom within life, because Black life is deprived of any inside. It is always already emptied by non Black concepts of non Black lives.

In conclusion, I will suggest that literature and philosophy, as Barthes, Hardt and Genet define them, are perhaps other ways of reintroducing a form of almost religious transcendence within the analysis of life as closure and the fascist essence of language. Revolution remains idealized as a way of finding one’s own salvation from within the prison of reality. What kind of language has then to be found that would not be a re-imprisonment of Black lives? Does it still belong to philosophy? Does it still belong to literature? For sure, this issue requires the opening of a yet unheard space. Afro-Pessimism might be its name. A name born in prison.

ⁱ Roland Barthes, “Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France,” in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearney and Maria Painwater, New York, Routledge, 1996, 365-366.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 366.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton University Press, 1975.

^{iv} Michael Hardt, “Prison Time,” in *Genet: In the Language of the Enemy*, special issue, *Yale French Studies*, no. 91, (1997): 64-79.

^v *Ibid.*, 66.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 67.

^{vii} “Stereotypic behaviour is an abnormal behaviour frequently seen in laboratory primates. It is considered an indication of poor psychological well-being in these animals. It is seen in captive animals but not in wild animals ... Stereotypic behaviour has been defined as a repetitive, invariant behaviour pattern with no obvious goal or function.¹ A wide range of animals, from canaries to polar bears to humans can exhibit

stereotypes. Many different kinds of stereotyped behaviours have been defined and examined. Examples include crib-biting and wind-sucking in horses, eye-rolling in veal calves, sham-chewing in pigs, and jumping in bank voles. Stereotypes may be oral or involve bizarre postures or prolonged locomotion. A good example of stereotyped behaviour is pacing. This term is used to describe an animal walking in a distinct, unchanging pattern within its cage ... [The locomotion may be combined with other actions, such as a head toss at the corners of the cage, or the animal rearing onto its hind feet at some point in the circuit.]” Nora Philbin, “Towards an Understanding of Stereotypic Behaviour in Laboratory Macaques,” Institute of Neurology, Queen Square, London, online article, p. 1.

^{viii} Roland Barthes, “Inaugural Lecture”, *op. cit.*, 368.

^{ix} Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, Tr. Richard Rojcewicz, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001.

^x *Ibid.*, 80.

^{xi} Michel Henry, *Marx, A Philosophy of Human Reality*, tr. Kathleen MacLaughlin, Indiana University Press, 1993.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, my translation, 608.

^{xiii} Michael Hardt, “Prison Time,” *op. cit.*, 68.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 64.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 70.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 68.

^{xviii} Roland Barthes, “Inaugural Lecture,” 369.

^{xix} Michael Hardt, Toni Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000, 61-62.

^{xx} Martin Luther King, in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in Jonathan Rieder, *Gospel of Freedom*, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2013, 170.

^{xxi} Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White, Black, Cinema and the Structure of U.S Antagonisms*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 279.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 281.

^{xxv} *Ibid.*, 288.