

Dariusz M. Doust*

Tragic Errors and Politics of Guilt

The name Antigone, echoed many a time in the contemporary literature, is also the name of a theoretical error marking the same vast interpretative literature: to perpetuate the phantasy of collective guilt in the guise of an emancipatory pathos. In this essay I will put this claim to the test by tracing three—arguably representative—variations of the same error. I will not overburden my argument with long quotations from Sophocles’s *Antigone*, or with a discussion about its specific place in Greek tragedy. The play has been endlessly discussed in academic and literary works, and any new endeavour in a similar vein would thus seem superfluous. In any case a close reading of the minutiae will be beyond the scope and objective of this text, which focuses instead on the impact of the figure of Antigone on contemporary intellectual debate. In this respect my argument has been kept largely free of quotations from the play, and references to textual interpretations are confined to footnotes.

I. Meinhof: Sacrifice

Germany in Autumn (1978) was the result of a collectivist collaboration between filmmakers belonging to the so-called German New Wave. In one sequence of the film, written by Heinrich Böll and directed by Volker Schlöndorff, we are shown a national TV broadcast of the play *Antigone* that would be eventually cancelled for fear of the harm it might cause to the so-called “public interest”. The sequence shows the boardroom meeting of the state broadcaster during which concerns are expressed about whether Antigone could invite unwelcome associations with the fate of the founders of the RAF. The RAF, or *Rote Armee Fraktion*, was the outcome of a decade-long radicalism in Germany. The onset of the process that led to armed struggle can be traced back to 1967, when a young student, Benno Ohnesorg, was shot and killed by the police at a demonstration against the Shah of Iran during his visit to West Berlin. No policeman was held responsible for the killing. As a young revolutionary of the time, Gudrun Ensslin, one of the future founders of the RAF, wrote these words: “They’ll kill us

* Department of History of Ideas, University of Gothenburg, Sweden & Research Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Xansi University, China

all. You know what kind of pigs we're up against. This is the Auschwitz generation we've got against us. You can't argue with the people who made Auschwitz. They have weapons and we haven't. We must arm ourselves."¹

The "we" here is a subject opposed to society as a whole, an avant-garde that will bring down the regime of the One Dimensional Man. In 1970, the RAF's statement following the operation to liberate Andreas Baader from prison demonstrated the objective position of their armed struggle:

Did they believe that we would talk about the development of the class struggle and the re-organization of the proletariat without arming ourselves at the same time? [...] Those who don't defend themselves die. Those who don't die are buried alive in prisons, in reform schools, in the slums of worker's districts, in the stone coffins of the new housing developments, in the crowded kindergartens and schools, in the brand new kitchens and bedrooms filled with fancy furniture bought on credit.²

A certain shift is discernible here: the political organisation of social forces is replaced by a pathos which inadvertently underlined a historical rupture between those social forces and political organization.

The armed struggle carried out by the RAF also highlighted the instrumental role of the mass media as the imaginary of the new capitalist society. The Springer Verlag publishing group and its tabloid newspaper *Bild-Zeitung* actively exploited the actions carried out by militant groups, either for the sake of instilling fear or encouraging more security measures. Members of the RAF such as Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader, though portrayed as monsters and villains, became front page icons in an orgy of pitifulness, horror and excitement. The life and destiny of Ulrike Meinhof, one of the leading members of the RAF, stands out as a tragic figure of this avant-garde. When in 1970 she agreed to help Andreas Baader's friends attack the prison guards and liberate Baader she was already a well-known journalist and an activist who had written extensively on the social situation of underprivileged groups in general and of woman workers in particular. Meinhof soon became a recognizable and fascinating face in the

¹ Quoted in Seán M. Sheehan, *Anarchism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), p. 108.

² *Ibid.*

RAF's armed struggle. In the words of the Austrian-born author Erich Fried, she was "the most important woman in German politics since Rosa Luxemburg."³ *Germany in Autumn* was one among a series of intellectual attempts to re-enact the sequence of events that came to a close with the mysterious deaths of all founding members of the RAF at Stammheim prison in October 1977.⁴

Film theoretician Thomas Elsaesser took up the analogy between Antigone and the RAF's actions, pointing out that it omits significant conflicts and contradictions that the RAF was an attempt to solve. However, Elsaesser also recognizes the fact that the whole style of an underground life comprising fast cars, communication and technical skills, and the staging of violent scenes on the streets, had an ambiguous aesthetic and political dimension.⁵ Thus, he identifies a shared element that connects the RAF episode to the figure of Antigone, namely the act of self-positioning outside the law:

Just as Antigone, by speaking from a position not above the law but outside the law, could become to Western political thought the 'ethical' subject par excellence, because the place outside the law is for any mortal a non-place, so the RAF's so-called self-obsession can be regarded as the consequence of their knowledge about the non-place from which they were speaking, doubled by the urban 'non-space' they were inhabiting.⁶

³ David Kramer, "Ulrike Meinhof, An Emancipated Terrorist?" in: Jane Slaughter and Robert Kern eds., *European Women on the Left: Socialism, Feminism and the Problems Faced by Political Women, 1880 to the Present* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 150; quoted in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

⁴ Here it is noteworthy to contrast *Germany in Autumn* and Reinhard Hauff's film *Stammheim* from 1986. *Germany in Autumn* is a funeral where you barely hear Chopin's March, a *Trauerspiel* that at any moment plunges into a bitter farce refusing to acknowledge that history as a matter of fact repeats itself twice; the figure of a pain-ridden self-deprecated and perplexed Fassbinder adds a tone of despair to the tragedy that is however the central generic theme. In 1986, the ambiguity of a shaken society seems evaporated. A cold damp angst pervades *Stammheim* in all its details including the photography. In hindsight, one may recognize this angst and the pending brutality permeating the photographic space of *Stammheim* as the forgotten precursor to the coming decades of cynicism after defeat; now the tragedy is played out on the side of the public.

⁵ Thomas Elsaesser, "Antigone Agonists: Urban Guerrilla or Guerrilla Urbanism?" in: Joan Copjec and Michael Sorkin eds. *Giving Ground: The Politics of Proximity* (New York: Verso, 1999).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 297; translation modified.

By the end of the essay and contrasting the televisual global/local “we” to a real “we”, Elsaesser concludes: “the very possibility of a non-ground would appear foreclosed by the sheer proliferations of (dis-)embodiments of a ‘we’ that alone can and should found a politics, by constantly confounding it.” Desiring subjectivity, an ethical We and a non-ground outside the law, are components in a structure that Elsaesser identifies as being essentially at work in the tragedy and provides the bridge to the RAF’s action. Desire here is understood in terms of the recognition of a lack which materializes itself in the impossibility of a non-place, an *atopos*, in relation to the law of the dominant order. For Elsaesser, this non-ground is objectively impossible but ethically justifiable. It is impossible because the “We” that the RAF strove for can only be the outcome of what Elsaesser calls a “cofounding”, whereas it is justifiable because the tragic heroine, Ulrike or Antigone, exposes the mechanisms of domination from without.

However, one might wonder why the space outside the law is so intuitively and unquestionably identified with the non-ground, occupied by a heroine in a tragedy, and how the impossible can offer any exposition of the really existing order. In other words, is the space outside the law a non-ground inevitably sealed by tragic fate? Or can this external relation to the law be conceived differently?

It is true that both Antigone and the members of the RAF share this minimal feature: they moralize the inconsistency of a certain mode of political representation. However, this moralization and its affective implications impede the possibility of a conjunction of the social and the political. At the encounter with the inconsistency of a symbolic order, a pre-Athenian *polis* or the post-war Germany, the affective release that the tragedy occasions is nourished by the belief in the fateful hand of history. In one case, the figure of the tragic heroine, the young Antigone, functions as the screen that conceals and reveals the fate of the city state model run by a *tyrannos*. In the other, the figure of Ulrike Meinhof masks and exposes the collision course between the history of class struggle in Germany and the rise of West Germany as part of a new global configuration. A “sense of morality” is believed to precede the possibility of political struggle. Affect and morality become welded together.

Affects are distributed as collective emotions of pity and pathos for the spectator before the melancholic heroine paying her debt; Antigone pays for a wrongdoing, her father’s, and others pay for their fathers’ crimes in Berlin. Félix Guattari,

an author whose name has come to be associated with what nowadays is called an “affective turn”, resumes this argument in his article “Like the Echo of a Collective Melancholia”, written after the death of the founding members of the RAF. Far from an investigation into the meandering of a tragic pathos, he contends:

While the secret war conducted by the industrial powers along the north-south axis to keep the Third World in tow is indeed the main issue, it should not make us forget that there is another north-south axis, which encircles the globe and along which conflicts of an equally essential nature are played out, involving the powers of the State and oppressed nationalities, immigrant workers, the unemployed, the “marginal,” the “non-guaranteed” and the “standardized” wage-earners [...] Like it or not, in today’s world, violence and the media work hand in glove. And when a revolutionary group plays the game of the most reactionary media, the game of collective guilt, then it has been mistaken: mistaken in its target, mistaken in its method, mistaken in its strategy, mistaken in its theory, mistaken in its dreams...⁷

The non-ground outside the law and a tragic pathos are welded by guilt for a crime transmitted from one generation to another. In this respect, guilt is the unhistoricized ground of all history. The play shows this in a clear way in the opening lines of the tragedy: “In spite of the orders, I shall give my brother burial, whether thou, Ismene, wilt join with me or not.” Antigone, Oedipus’ daughter, living in King Creon’s household, tells Ismene, her sister, what she is resolved to do. But this defiant resoluteness is immediately neutralised, as it would otherwise surpass the generic boundaries of tragedy. The decision is explained as not originating in a desire for life but in a debt to the dead, expressed in the following words, which Sophocles puts into her mouth:

Loving, I shall lie with him, yes, with my loved one,
when I have dared the crime of piety.
Longer the time in which to please the dead
than the time with those up here.⁸

⁷ Félix Guattari, “Like the Echo of a Collective Melancholia” in: *Semiotext(e)*, IV, no. 2, 1982, p 105.

⁸ “Antigone”, verses 73–75; translated by Elizabeth Wyckoff in: David Grene et al. eds. *Greek Tragedies* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

The full closure of possibilities is condensed in these opening lines where a decision is announced in order to be annulled. With defiance neutralised as duty towards the dead, the heroine is bound to the law. The *topos* occupied by the tragic heroine is the ground where the law has already advanced its claim; there is no grounding possibility outside of it, only the war of all against all that awaits in that unthinkable outside. This fusion of subject and guilt closes off a possible presence of desires outside the dominant plane of representation. If it be true that a regime of representation collects and totalizes all meaning production upon its represented surface according to a set of imperatives, then a singularity, insofar as it is able to produce a historical divide running across the plane of representation, will be a political moment, only if its external position, its “outside-ness” is a function of imaginable collective acts located in that divide within. This possibility of an outside, the space beyond the walls of the city, is exposed, albeit only as a barren, murky space, populated by dead bodies and blinding sand storms in the Greek tragedy. That is why, in the tragedy, Antigone oscillates between different discourses and finally ends up in guilt as the ground for reaction against the nonsensical decree issued by Creon. The error (*hamartia*, singled out by Aristotle as the central element in tragedy) in the contemporary encounter with the tragedy is the identification of the tragic figure as an ethically justifiable position, whereas this figure is made of that undifferentiated coalescence of a decision and an alliance with the dead that serves the tragedy as a genre. Antigone, taken out of its generic context, perpetuates a theoretical mistake which plays into the hands of the fantasy of a collective guilt, blurs what Guattari called two axes of a secret war, and evades history on behalf of an eternal debt.

II. Butler: Total Being

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It is this eternal debt that brings us closer to an investigation of a second major theme in interpretations of the play; Antigone as the expression of a subversive possibility in regard to kinship structures and the order of patriarchal power. A classic locus of such a reading is *Antigone's Claim* by Judith Butler.⁹ The ambition of the book is clearly set out by the author: to expound upon the relation between kinship and “the reigning episteme of cultural intelligibility” and how

⁹ All references are to Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

these in turn relate to what she calls “the possibility of social transformation”.¹⁰ Antigone is said to represent “a possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed.”¹¹ This possibility is then identified as questioning and problematizing the kinship structure. According to Butler, Antigone “does not conform to the symbolic law and she does not prefigure a final restitution of the law. Though entangled in the terms of kinship, she is at the same time outside those norms.”¹² In other words, Antigone figures “the non-human on the border of human.”¹³ She does not represent a sovereign anti-position in the political life of the Greek city, but “a chiasm within the vocabulary of political norms. If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political *catachresis*, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founders on its own founding laws.”¹⁴ Butler’s reading establishes a continuity between two heterogeneous standpoints. It is claimed that the figure of Antigone “implicitly raises the question for us of what those preconditions [of kinship relations] must be”, a questioning that takes place at an extreme limit, at the cost of suspension of all representations. In a second line of thought, Butler also suggests that Antigone’s claim, being rooted in an impossible position, opens up “a new field of the human”.

Nothing is less evident than this assumption of a transition from a negative, non-representable exposure of a patriarchal social order, to “a new field of the human”, which after all means a historical and political project aligned with the possibility of social transformation—unless one identifies or rather limits the scope of a constitutive political act to an unrepresentable representation of an aesthetic figure. More precisely, what is presented as a “possibility” is the politics of tragedy in a nutshell, the proof that the impossible is eternally excluded. The implicit presupposition is that a pure negativity, a non-representable—the uncanniness of the radiating beauty of a heroine before whom the kinship structure reveals its outer limits and the regime of intelligibility founders—somehow widens the field of new possibilities for social transformation. How can this wish, this fast track from negativity, law and guilt to social transformation, be

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹² Ibid., p. 72.

¹³ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 82.

conceived as intelligible? Why couldn't the opposite be the case, that the play brings forth the closure of the field of possibility, as was probably the case for an Athenian spectator, who would deem the mode of governance in Thebes as too primitive and thus doomed to founder? Antigone was there merely a "vanishing mediator", an affective remainder, a narrative device that arouses pity and fear; thus further consolidating the tragic but inevitable end.

To answer these questions, it is perhaps more accurate to revisit a more recent—and seemingly more remote—figure than the Attic Greek one, namely the proletariat and the demise of the political subjective position conveyed by this figure. The jump from a purely negative force outside social antagonisms to the half open field of new human experience is the effect of a political strategy. This strategy finds a firm ground for a politics of representation in the non-articulated presence of a pure being, covered by a thin layer of dust; the dead body of Polynices lying beneath the walls of the polis. Contrary to this politics, the social body of the proletariat was the non-representable in the dominant representation of bourgeois society; yet, this working class from the slums of the nineteenth century cities, in its productive actuality, through its irruptions onto the public stage, remained a social force. It certainly instilled horror and fascination, while at the same time retaining a productive collective force that negated the social order by dividing it along the lines of an adversarial social agenda. This negation aimed to invalidate the law's unconditional power. In this sense, the proletariat functioned as a dialectical limit between the given social order and an imaginable future at the heart of the same order. The decisive difference between such a limit and what Butler calls the "less-than-human" is the one between existence and the absolute sameness of Being, this unalterable Other; the difference between what a political act is—which is always impure, prone to failure—and the dead body of the fallen absolute. What is asked for—not only in Butler's work but also in a number of contemporary readings of *Antigone*—is the transition to "a new field of the human" without any binding commitment to a positive and organized historical project. Therefore, we are left with an endless quest for something that has both the consistency of an Other and the fluidity of a force, the transgressive quality of an unspeakable sensation and the uncompromising solidity of a will. This spectacular entity, in its radical impossibility and its inevitable tragic destiny, fascinates; it is both a proletariat without party and a party without proletariat, the misfortunes of pure being viewed from the interval opened up by gender difference.

III. Hegel: Dance Lessons

Most commentators of *Antigone*, sooner or later, stumble over the German reception of the play, from Goethe to Hölderlin, and also to Kierkegaard. But Hegel's comments in *Philosophy of Right* and in *Phenomenology of Spirit* have set the framework for contemporary readings of *Antigone*. If existence is determined from the point of view of pure being as its less than pure appearance, as being indebted to being and guilty for carrying the defects of empirical life, then there is always a moral schema surrounding the settlement of the debt involved. In Hegel, morality is defined within a range that starts from the immediacy of ethics represented by family, and its mediated form called the state, the instance that in its highest form, the constitution, is the realization of substantiality in and for itself.¹⁵ Crime and guilt are for Hegel rooted in the antithetical relationship between what is "The divine right of essential Being"¹⁶ at one extreme, and the public, secular right on the other. Hegel's reading of *Antigone* establishes, first, a reciprocal relation in guilt; both Creon and Antigone violate the other party's rights. The first violates the divine and mythical natural right and the second violates the laws of the city. This reciprocity is however a pure external relation between the two parties and as such the cause of the ulterior disintegration of the relation. Creon's decree is viewed by Hegel as an intermediary manifestation of "the restored unitary self of the community"¹⁷, but this is different from the realization of this unitary spirit of community.

The corpse in the play lying outside the walls of Thebes is the left-over of a historical process through which the foundering of the external relation and the realisation of the unitary spirit of community will be later achieved in a universal constitutional state. Hence, even though Creon only represents the actual but limited expression of the spirit, still Antigone's defiance against the unitary power of the state is qualified as a crime.¹⁸ The defiance itself is traced back by Hegel to family right, the necessary but necessarily supervened ground for the public right. The family right, the inner space of the family, will eventually

¹⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), § 165 and the addendum to § 166.

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller and J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), § 467, p. 280.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, § 473, p. 286.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, §470, p. 284.

fail, as it is by definition a right pertaining to pure particularity as opposed to the universal organisation of rights first realised in the state form.¹⁹ Hegel views tragedy as the stage where state confronts its own mythical and surpassed substance. The error committed by the higher unitary power is to overlook its dependence on the ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) that at this early level only appears as its external counterpart and not its inner limit: “But the outwardly actual which has taken away from the inner world its honour and power has in so doing consumed its own essence.”²⁰ Creon’s error is the cannibalism of the state to consume its own ground. Hegel’s definition of the Aristotelian term *hamartia*, error, is the forgetting of those waters of forgetfulness from which the state form once emerged: “The publicly manifest Spirit has the root of its power in the nether world. The self-certainty and self-assurance of a nation possesses the truth of its oath, which binds all into one, solely in the mute unconscious substance of all, in the waters of forgetfulness. Thus it is that the fulfilment of the Spirit of the upper world is transformed into its opposite, and it learns that its supreme right is a supreme wrong, that its victory is rather its own downfall.”²¹

Antigone’s figure is for Hegel a piece of mute substance that intrudes into the public self-sufficiency of the sovereign power. The interesting detail is that Hegel, like Kant before him, views rebellion against power to be impermissible, and Antigone’s defiance, precisely as the tragedy intends it, is reduced to a metonymy for the corpse of Polynices, thus exiled from the city. Hegel adopts this narrative strategy when he writes: “The dead, whose right is denied, knows therefore how to find instruments of vengeance, which are equally effective and powerful as the power which injured it.”²² The dead is injured, finds instruments of vengeance and acts, and defiance is deprived of any social significance. Starting from the substantiality of a moment called ethics, Hegel’s dialectic of rights overlooks the fact that Antigone’s defiance was in the first place a decision, clearly marked at the beginning of the tragedy, but only as an ephemeral moment to be surpassed by the tragic fate dictated by the genre. She may be siding with the dead, but if so, this would not inevitably entail a complete identification with the corpse of her fallen brother. It would not have been the case, if only the

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¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., § 474, p. 287.

²¹ Ibid. Hegel’s comments are related to verses 520–525 in *Antigone*.

²² Ibid.

decision had been connected back to the social life in the *polis*.²³ But such a connection, a decision to disobey, is beyond the scope both of tragedy and Hegel's argument. Tragedy conflates these two otherwise distinct moments, kinship and decision, divine laws and resoluteness of the deed, the ancestral duty and the right to rebellion; the adolescent girl who heedlessly defies the ruler and the ruler who does not see what even the blind Tiresias can obviously see. This dramatic moment confuses even the moral register into which Hegel tries to place her. How could Antigone, the representation of family duties, that undifferentiated inner substance, act in such a resolute and self-conscious manner, while Creon proceeds blindly to the extent that his actions bring forth the tragic end of his state? That is why for Hegel the dead becomes an active agent and Antigone its prolongation among the living. What is overlooked is what renders the play coherent: the decisiveness of her decision remains indistinguishable from the unconditionality of Creon's edict. This in-distinction is narratively supported by the guilt stemming from the filial axis of kinship structure. This is why Hegel's otherwise powerful analysis of a moment of surpassing and sublation of the tyrannical sovereign power sees no further than Creon. Hegel adopts a viewpoint that Creon, by issuing his edict, had believed to be meaningful: that the dead can be injured, humiliated or is else capable of avenging his lot. If Creon's act is part of a Greek tragedy, Hegel's reading yields to the dead in a dance macabre.

Returning to Creon's edict, it would seem to state the following: "All enemies of state are exempted from being honoured by ceremonial burial." In other words, the universality of the law asserts that any person who has insulted the state power is simultaneously exempt from being honoured. He is neither questioning nor ignoring the power of the gods or family right. In fact, he is maintaining the dividing line, the river of forgetfulness, between those forces and the secular order of the city.

The introduction of the universal articulation of law as the unconditional principle of sovereignty introduces a split in society. This is also consistent with Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's reading of the birth of the tragic hero as a transitory figure and an outcome of the encounter between the heroic (epic)

²³ On Hegel's theory of family and sisterly love, see Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, "Hegel's Antigone" in: Patricia Jagentowicz Mills ed., *Feminist Interpretations of G. W. F. Hegel* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 64–67.

order and the introduction of formal laws in the Greek *polis*, namely the Solonian reforms.²⁴ The deployment of a universal legislation projects its claim of unconditionality on a subjective scale and renders this latter tragic. Both Hegel and Vernant and Vidal Naquet identify a central conflict between a particular instance (family, the pastoral order) and the public articulation of the universal (public right or *Staatsrecht*). However, the main schema—Hegel’s or in a more historical variant of Hegel’s reading—assumes the inconsistency generated from inside the articulation of the universal, but dislocates the split. Rather than an expression of two different temporalities, the pastoral or family right on the one side and the posterior public expression on the other, the split that the tragedy deals with is a synchronic differentiation; a confrontation between a singular decision and the unconditional obedience demanded by the edict. The dead enemy was mistreated in the Greek city by being left unburied, a common Greek convention which stigmatizes their Persian archenemies and their customs. By issuing a decree and proclaiming something that could have been considered as a convention, Creon is doing something more than repeating the convention. He is declaring a punishment meted out to a dead body and demanding the unconditional obedience of the city. Antigone replicates that excessive moment implied by the decree and rushes into an exchange about *nomos* and unwritten laws (verses 450-470). She becomes the perfect Hegelian heroine, representing family piety and the ethical duties in the family domain (*Sittlichkeit*), thus assuming the guilt for an inevitable crime. The inconsistent particular instance, a particular case of the universal, is the decreed punishment upon a dead body. The singularity of the act carried out by Antigone is already effaced by tragedy as genre with its generic conventions of a preordained misfortune; and, finally, the universality of the split running through the political order is recovered, transformed into individual debt in an affiliative kinship relation.

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The crucial theme in Hegel’s interpretation is neither the sister-brother relation, nor the conflict between the particular and the universal. Hegel’s reading in *Philosophy of Right* upholds the thesis inherited from Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* that an act of disobedience in regard to any power is a crime. The legalism in Hegel’s case is not the law of Thebes, but the future public right of a constitution.

²⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce Ancienne* (Paris: Editions Découverte, 1986), p. 154.

Again here, the constant and unalterable element is the guilt that existence pays to the essence of being.

IV. Desire and Debt

When the law legislates, not upon bare life, but rather upon the corpse, and subordinates it to its universal sanctions, its unconditionality encounters its own inconsistency. A critique along these lines was delivered in 1953 by Lacan.²⁵ In his *Seminar VII* Lacan's analysis of the play—in contrast to Hegel—does not evolve around the mediations in a dialectical movement from family ethics to the constitution of state. Instead, the point of departure is the beauty of a fantastic screen presented by Antigone. In Lacan's dialectic “the beauty effect is a blindness effect.”²⁶ The coincidence of the blinding point and the fascinated gaze, a theme that Lacan would develop in more detail in *Seminar XI*, is determined by the way phantasy is constituted; the inevitably imagined something that resides beyond the law. For Lacan, Antigone reaches for this point, this thing that is supposed to be beyond, which is, in a dialectical turn, nothing else than the void.²⁷ Hence, Lacan's reading of the drama concerns ultimately the gap that is marked out by the tragedy between the order of existence and Being. Polynices' corpse, the dead body, is the manifestation of the unique value of Being. For Lacan, the tragedy, by being true, excludes eventuality. It is a structure locked in a blind point through which Being is *supposed* to intrude into existence, and yet this point is not a site wherein a possible subjectivity could be situated.

How can Lacan's account enable us to perceive the place of tragedy in the conjunction of the social and the political? Lacan's theory of the tragic subject starts from the conditions of articulation of the universal principle. Evoking Goethe, Lacan underscores that Creon is acting in the name of the law and in the best interests of everyone. The issue is not that public law interferes in the private

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, 1959-1960*, trans. with notes by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279. Lacan's comment on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is to be viewed as a phantasy of self-generation, in other words a denial of being born.

sphere but that the law demands unconditionally the obedience of all.²⁸ It is this absolute unconditionality, inherent to the law in its formal structure, that at every turn contains a potential tyrannical decree. The cruelty of the edict aims not at Polynices, an individual in the network of historical relations, but his corpse, pure Being. Creon is not simply the representation of the social organization as Hegel has it; instead he becomes the instrument of a law that crosses the border and aims at the realm of pure Being at the very moment when it claims its unconditional universality. Hence, Antigone is neither an incarnation of the laws of the underworld nor a counter-discourse that belongs to another incompatible realm of existence. Only from the point of view of the law could she be conceived thus, because this is the only possible way for the social order to grasp “her senseless and bewildered nature”. While her action exposes the conditioned nature of law, Antigone, as a figure, perpetuates a guilt that seals the conditionality of the law.

Antigone’s arguments as to why she is prepared to sacrifice her life for a brother but not for a child or a husband is crucial not only because it takes up the kinship structures pertaining to *Oedipus Rex*.²⁹ Her argument, the uniqueness of the brother born from the same womb, implies a desire for absolute sameness. This sameness in pure being is the reverse side of the phantasy that upholds the *tyrannos* who in the final analysis is a primordial, unborn figure. Such is the *aporia* in *Oedipus Rex*, the impossible position of the *tyrannos* as father of himself and son of no mother, the spirit of unity, which turns out to have other origins. The law in its formal and tautological structure refers to the autochthonic phantasy—to use Lévi-Strauss’s term in his analysis of myth.³⁰ It is a disavowal of the fact that the one-ness of the law, its unambiguous imperative force, is preceded by the social struggle of both women and men.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 254–55 & 258–60. Lacan develops this idea further in an essay “Kant with Sade” in: Jacques Lacan and Bruce Fink, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

²⁹ The passage 904-15 in *Antigone* has been discussed extensively since Goethe. Antigone’s argument in the passage contains a historical reference to a story in Herodotus (3.119). An early explanation is given by T. J. Buckton, “Goethe on the Antigone of Sophocles” in: *Notes & Queries*, Oxford 33/1856, pp. 123–24.

³⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth” in: *Structural Anthropology* (London: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 202–212.

Antigone's tragedy is precisely this innocent complacency towards the law, which excludes future alliances, invalidates imaginable futures. The only conceivable option for her, as the chain of actions unfolds leading to the inevitable collapse of the sovereign, is to succumb to the weight of guilt, assuming its validity and hence descending to the underground. Underground here is tantamount to the absence of those social forces that would have separated the tyrannical exercise of political power from the affairs of the city. Antigone, delivering explanations of blood ties with the parents and the underground forces, becomes *the effect of the law in its unmediated exercise*: the debt to be settled for the committed error.

What does this tell us about the tragic dimension? More so than the misfortunes of fate, which is evoked in the play by its mythical name *Até*, tragedy is the mode of subjective existence, not per se, but *from the perspective of the law*. The argument I am advancing is not that the tragic dimension of human action is nullified by political decision, that a revolution as event does not bring forward a tragic or comic dimension of the so-called post-revolutionary era. The point is to separate the unconsciously hoped for state of being subject to tragedy from the tragic dimension of human existence. The desire that inhabits the action, beyond whatever the agent imagines, is distinct from the fate it realizes in the tragedy itself. Or in other words, the figure of Antigone, in her irreconcilable heroic act, is the figure of dissociation between act and desire. This logic is a well-known story; a price is set for a desiring act, culpability is monetarized and sacrifices harvested, by a church or any other instrument that extracts the surplus. The burden of this debt eclipses desire insofar as this latter aims at something behind a historically given situation. From this point on, three paths are thinkable and historically practiced.

The first evolves around a reasonable position; harmony and balance at the horizon of a closed universe, the purification of passions through catharsis is the preferred method. The new liberal subject, celebrating the pure monetary universe of debt and guilt, walks backwards along the same path. As the innocence of living among deities in a perfectly closed world is long gone—even for the Athenian audience of *Antigone*—and despite knowing or imagining that we know more than ever before yet still doing as we did, this historical “we” necessarily traces the same path backwards, eyes open and affects adjusted to yesterday's fluctuations of the stock market.

Not far from this lies the second possible movement, its opposite but at the same time simple reverse: the cult of impossible pure being beyond all existence in the name of desire, veneration for the big Events of the past, vacillating between voluntarism and nostalgic defeatism; ultimately—to paraphrase Lacan—a case of necrophilia.³¹

It is through the separation of debt and the act of desire that a third path can be conceived. It is neither the closed universe of the first path, nor the cult of the real, settling the debt by sacrifice, but a re-definition of the possible as that which is produced, created by human desires. This involves questioning the possible as an exclusive modality of being and detaching it from the old tautological definition, i.e. the possibility of being and impossibility of non-being (Parmenides). It also involves defining desire as the act of production of a possibility independent of the indebtedness that is implied by the phenomenology of gift and apparition. This latter is ultimately about the indebtedness of the spectator before whom the world appears. Above all, this means to take part in and take sides in the process of desiring production.³²

The crucial point is that there is no desire without the act of production and no act of production without an object of desire. Desire as detached from empirical objects and in a pure state is a will that sustains the Kantian imperative,³³ an abstract freedom that leads into unconditional submission. On the contrary, the object as such, that which requires its subject, is an inconsistent entity that at each encounter is either less or more than the perfect self-sameness of the thing

³¹ “The object, as I have shown in Freudian experience—the object of desire, where we see it in its nakedness—is but the slag of a fantasy in which the subject does not come to after blacking out [syncope]. It is a case of necrophilia.” J. Lacan, “Kant with Sade”, p. 658.

³² Undeniably this thesis follows what Lacan proposes in the last lessons of *Seminar VII*. The term desiring production is from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Viking Press, 1977) which may surprise defenders of a certain academic rationale, but these references follow this simple principle: our interest in *Anti-Oedipus* is motivated by the series of answers that this work provides in regard to questions formulated by Lacan in *Seminar VII*. Desiring production is a term that here should be understood in a non-vitalist sense, and production as an act-sequence through which desire comes into effect and this effectiveness is desire as actuality. Thereby, we do not intend to equalize the Lacanian conception of desire and Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the same term.

³³ See Bernard Baas, *Le Désir Pur: Parcours philosophiques dans les parages de J. Lacan* (Louvain: Peeters, 1992).

aimed at; desiring production invalidates at each turn the principle of non-contradiction as the foundation of objective consistency.³⁴ These encounters are the history of desiring production, the history of aleatory encounters, of love as *tyche* and of facing the lack of continuity in a causal chain.³⁵ Lacan singled out the phantasy involved by dredging up a word from Freud, *das Ding*. That which is supposed to be beyond the empirical, given objects, a pure being qua being and nothing else. This pure being is the corpse we cover up and put in a box beneath the earth. There is no desire without the act of production and an act is effectuated when its subject assumes the inevitable inconsistency of the object that is yet to become—as a side product of the desiring process.

Emancipatory projects of the past two centuries may have failed in many respects. The lesson to draw is neither the staging of a non-ground, nor the quest for a pure being allegedly outside the law, and least of all the circumvention of tragicomic dimensions of desire. Each of those options ultimately perpetuates the guilt that is the sworn ally of capital. Fleeing this guilt, either by withdrawal deeper into the heart of institutions sustained by the circulation of capital, or by turning the guilt into affective reaction to the atrocities of Thebes, only creates clever story-tellers and well-behaved spectators awaiting the final catharsis. On the contrary, there is no ultimate conclusion to draw in theory alone, except for the articulation of new questions concerning the changing conditions for possible emancipatory projects, all the while bearing in mind that any such project only can be thought and conceptualized within a social and political conjuncture whose lines are drawn by desiring production; thus as a historical possibility.

³⁴ Jan Lukasiewicz, a Polish philosopher close to Alexius Meinong and Bolzano, provided a critique of the Aristotelian logic of the principle of non-contradiction as early as 1910. See Jan Lukasiewicz, “Sur le principe de contradiction chez Aristote” in: Barbara Cassin and Michel Nancy eds., *Rue Descartes*, (Paris: Collège internationale de philosophie, 1991), pp. 9–32. I discuss this question with a reference to Freud and Brentano in a chapter in Dariush M. Doust, *Randanmarkningar till psykoanalysens etik* (Daidalos: Bokförlaget, 2003), pp 35–70.

³⁵ See Mladen Dolar, “Tyché, Clinamen, Den” in: *Continental Philosophical Review*, 46/2013, pp. 223–239.