



Rethinking Resistance: Critical Theory before and after Deleuze

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Beginning Critical Theory

At the beginning of 1930, Theodor W. Adorno, who was only 28 years old, was awarded the *venia legendi* (teaching permission) for philosophy and the academic title “Privatdozent”, after his *Habilitationsschrift* (on Kierkegaard) had been accepted by the faculty of philosophy on the basis of two positive reviews, by Adorno’s older friend and mentor Max Horkheimer and the prominent theologian-philosopher Paul Tillich. This title traditionally comes without academic position or pay, but is the precondition for applications for the position of professor. In early May, he was obliged to give his inaugural lecture to the academic public, and he chose a rather programmatic subject, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, using the occasion for a rigorous critique of the major trends in current German academic philosophy and a bold statement concerning the possible future of a certain kind of materialist philosophy which he was just about to develop.

In retrospect, this short text has been interpreted as one of the first and most significant formulations of what since Max Horkheimer’s famous programmatic article on “Traditional and Critical Theory” from 1937 came to be known as “Critical Theory”. Its status can only be compared to a text from 1931 by Horkheimer himself, on the current state of social philosophy and on the interdisciplinary program of the Institute for Social Research (cf. Horkheimer 1993), founded in 1924 and led by him since late 1930. By 1937, the Institute of course had already left Germany in an effort to keep up its work with a reduced group of researchers dispersed over different places. It is therefore plausible to treat the early texts, by both Horkheimer and Adorno, as more or less authentic formulations of the original intentions of the project of Critical Theory.¹

¹ For more on the institutional history and the systematic ambitions, cf. Jay 1973 and Bonß/Honneth 1982.



The Now of Philosophy

Seen from this angle, it is striking how Adorno's inaugural lecture leads up to a conception of a critical philosophy that is not dogmatic, not a systematic and more or less coherent doctrine or social theory, but essentially diagnostic: a critical assessment of the present. Commenting rather aggressively on Heidegger's existential philosophy, Simmel's "philosophy of life", Husserl's formal and Scheler's material phenomenology, Adorno poses as the question of the foremost philosophical urgency the "question of philosophy's actuality" (A: 124), its relation to the problems and solutions of the present.² Adorno accepts that this might – in accordance with the progressive wing of the Vienna Circle – result in seeing philosophy as a sort of "science" that contributes to the production of new knowledge and new possibilities of changing the societies we live in. But he opts for a special, non-scientific status for philosophy: the ideal, goal, or "idea of science [*Wissenschaft*] is research [*Forschung*]; [however,] that of philosophy is interpretation [*Deutung*]" (A: 124 [334]).³

Here, a rather peculiar and fascinating concept of philosophizing can be found, one that is at the same time intimately tied to the social world it inhabits and seeks to make sense of (being in this sense empirical, even empiricist), but also creatively transcending it and interpreting it in ways in which it hasn't been looked at and understood before. And it is here that I see a deep, indeed striking, conceptual and methodological parallel to Deleuze's kind of critical diagnostic work, of which the "Postscript on Control Societies", in its attempt to decipher the internal logic of contemporary society, is a major example. I will come back to this parallel in the second half of my discussion.

Reading Society

But what then, for Adorno, is "interpretation" (or *Deutung*)? A striking feature of his argumentation is that it remains rather vague, or metaphorical, and has recourse to a recurring trope, that of the "figure" (*Figur*) that is to be constructed in philosophical work. Philosophy does not solve an already clear question or "riddle", but it "has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, into

² References in the following passages refer to this text ("A" = Adorno 1977). Whenever I use original terms or phrases or have changed the translation, the page reference to the German version (Adorno 1973) is given in square brackets.

³ It seems plausible that Adorno might have also thought of his friend Kracauer's work in which the "inconspicuous surface-level expressions" are treated as symptomatic of an "epoch" since they "provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things". Also for Kracauer, for example in his famous essay on the "Mass Ornament" from 1927, "knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions", since the "fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally" (Kracauer 1995: 57). On the systematic context of Kracauer's cultural criticism, cf. Huyssen 2018.



changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure [*in wechselnde Versuchsanordnungen zu bringen, bis sie zur Figur geraten*]", so that a problem or problematic becomes visible for the first time (A: 127 [335]). Philosophy's force lies in its "power of constructing figures, or images [*Bilder*], out of the isolated elements of reality" (ibid.).

This means, however, that philosophy, unlike the social sciences that provide it with its material, does not merely take up or replicate social reality, but is actually constructing or creating something, namely a distinctive "figure" or "image" of social reality. This is indeed a rather technical, constructive task; the "trial combinations" just cited refer metaphorically to the laboratory setup in scientific experiments. So "interpretation" in this sense, as Adorno explicitly states, is not meant to reveal any hidden or implicit "intentions" but "to interpret unintentional reality" precisely by way of "the power of constructing figures, or images". Referencing Benjamin's book on the German *Trauerspiel* from 1928, Adorno calls this the "program of every authentically materialist knowledge [*Erkenntnis*]" (ibid.).⁴

These rather abstract and enigmatic formulations occur in varying forms without being specified more clearly. There is only one passage where "an example as a thought experiment" is given for this possibility "to group the elements of a social analysis in such a manner that the way they came together made a figure [*derart zu gruppieren, daß ihr Zusammenhang eine Figur ausmacht, in der jedes einzelne Moment aufgehoben ist*]" which certainly does not lie before us organically, but which must first be posited [*hergestellt*"]; and this example is the core notion of any Marxist account of capitalist society, namely "the commodity structure [*Warenform*]" or commodity-form (A: 128 [337]).

So the one example Adorno gives is indeed a rather well-known one, namely the idea that capitalist society is structured by the commodity form as its basic law and core logic through and through. But, Adorno contends, this idea is not in itself a thought or cognition that can be derived or deduced from social analysis as such; rather, it is the effect of the figure or image the social philosopher constructs or draws. He makes us see that this is the law and the logic of capitalist society by arranging the (empirically given) social elements in a certain way, by actively bringing them into a constellation that makes us see that this is their inner mechanism.

To understand capitalist societies in such a way therefore is the outcome of a specific interpretation (or *Deutung*), not a fact to be observed or described directly. The images have to be constructed to be seen, they are "not simply self-given [*keine bloßen Selbst-*

⁴ Cf. Benjamin 2019 and, for commentary, Ross 2016. While it is beyond the scope of this discussion, it would be a challenging task to relate Benjamin's "dialectical image", which was enormously influential for Adorno, to Deleuze's "image of thought". For introductions to these essential and complex concepts in both theories, cf. Hillach 2000 and Rajchman 2000 respectively.



gegebenheiten]", but "they must be produced" (A: 131 [341]). And they are valuable for what they are "in the last analysis alone by the fact that reality crystalizes about them in striking conclusiveness [*daß in schlagender Evidenz die Wirklichkeit um sie zusammenschießt*]" (ibid.). Philosophical intelligibility, as it were, is the effect of interpretation, not of observation or research. It is the outcome of a construction that is in itself figural or imaginal. This formal construction of a totality out of many elements is an act of making us see a coherent whole, a *Zusammenhang*, while empirical reality until now just gave the impression of an incoherent ensemble of many different, plural, non-cohering phenomena.

While these remarks might sound so general that there is no indication as to what realm the figures or images belong to, the reference to the commodity-form, to materialism and Marxism makes explicit what is implicit in the entire text, especially in its critical parts attacking the bourgeois trends in the current German academy. Adorno ostensibly inscribes himself into a tradition and discourse of Marxist philosophizing that seeks the alliance with a certain kind of social scientific analysis and that tries to align itself with certain political struggles and social movements. The reference to the commodity-form clearly indicates that the law and logic to be revealed by way of constructing a figure or an image of society refers to the very fact, or the face, of domination in a given society. It is, ultimately, the figure or image of capital that is made visible in highlighting and outlining the centrality and pervasiveness of the commodity-form for the totality of capitalist societies.

So the social philosopher will not just search for any pattern or structure, she will try to draw the lines where society itself draws them, between classes, identities, statuses, between those who have and can – and those who do not. Constructing the figure of a class society, we might infer, means tracing its (often hidden) class structure, outlining its (rather implicit) divisions and grouping its (seemingly multiple and incoherent) effects on individual behavior, self-understanding and situation in such a way that their common structure or determination becomes visible, which also means: intelligible. But since this profile or face is one of domination, the new visibility or intelligibility is not neutral; it is no new objective fact about the state of affairs, but a highly political insight.

In formulations that owe more to Hegel and Marx than most others in this essay, Adorno can therefore directly align philosophical interpretation and social transformation: "The interpretation of given reality and its negation [*Aufhebung*] are connected to each other, not, of course, in the sense that reality is negated [*aufgehoben*] in the concept, but that from the construction of a certain figure of reality [*Figur des Wirklichen*] the demand for reality's real transformation follows promptly" (A: 129 [338]). If the object of interpretation is social reality itself and if this specific social reality is shown or made visible as a figure and pattern of power and domination, this reality can and will



provoke counter-power and the desire for emancipation. If, in other words, this philosophical construction or interpretation is to be successful, it will in itself generate some transformative, revolutionary force. To philosophically interpret or decipher society as it is means conjuring the energies that can make it otherwise.

The New in the Present

It would be dishonest to neglect the many open questions this program of a critical, interpretative philosophy still poses. Even its most central idea, the idea of interpretation (or *Deutung*), seems overdetermined. Neither speculative nor empirical, neither purely conceptual nor aesthetic, but constructive and receptive at the same time, this operation seems to presuppose the material of social-scientific analysis and transcend it at the same time. But neither the exact methodological forms of this intellectual exercise nor its exact conditions of success seem to be outlined sufficiently. While the strong reliance on, or even presupposition of (a kind of) Marxist social analysis is openly acknowledged, it seems hard to determine the systematic status of this theory. While the formalist character of this form of interpretation seems to rely on the striking effect of producing immediate evidence, it appears hard to justify the supposition of a unified coherent totality.⁵

It would be equally dishonest to claim that the kind of analysis the “Postscript on Control Societies” is trying to perform works exactly along the same lines as the early Adorno’s experimental critical philosophy. This would mean neglecting the deep conceptual, methodological and systematic differences underlying the two projects, many of which relate back to the completely different background theories they are rooted in. On the one hand, there is a level on which Critical Theory and Poststructuralism have to be seen as alternative, competing philosophical frameworks that might share some general goals, like the critical demystification of social relations and regimes of meaning, even though their means, strategies and methods are hardly compatible.⁶

But on the other hand, specifically with regards to the two texts at hand, there is a striking, even uncanny, resemblance on the performative, textual level on which Deleuze in his famous text seems to practice something rather alike the critical-constructive analysis Adorno is calling for. Both subscribe to the view that the ultimate task of philosophy is reading, deciphering the present and capturing the characteristics and features of our present society. Both determine these features in formal terms and call for a formalist, one might even say quasi-structuralist, type of analysis which results in the

⁵ Cf. Jay 1984 for the theoretical history of the concept of ‘totality’, and Demirović 1994 for a systematic discussion.

⁶ For my general view on the relation between Critical Theory and Poststructuralism, cf. Saar 2018b.



creation of a thought-image, a profile of this society. Both identify power as the decisive dimension to determine the specificity of our present, seeking to identify a specific pattern or structure of power that constitutes the very logic of current social relations. And both, finally, understand their analysis as contributing to the very struggle in which the immanent forces to transform, overcome or at least resist this pattern of power and/or domination can be articulated, and perhaps even supported, by theoretical or philosophical work.

Seen in the light of these similarities and analogies, the “Postscript on Control Societies” can first be viewed as contributing not only to a discussion opened up by Foucault’s writings on power and discipline in the mid-1970s. It can also be seen as part of a theoretical passion for the question of the present as it was introduced by Kant and radicalized by Left-Hegelian philosophy in the first half of the 19th century and taken up by 20th century Neo-Marxism (from Lukács to Gramsci to Negri), where the material (and materialist) diagnosis of the emergence, structure and future of modern societies became the most urgent question. This can be seen as a translation of the traditional question of the Enlightenment (“what can be thought and how can we act today, in the present?”) into a social register (“what can be thought, experienced and done within the epistemic regimes, social structures and subject positions operative and available in this given society?”).

Second, Deleuze’s reflections can be placed alongside other attempts (from Tocqueville to Weber to Luhmann) to understand the specificity of modern or late-modern forms of power that have evolved and have changed shape, from more personal, hierarchical and institution-based to more informal, ubiquitous and reversible forms of power that have adapted to democratic conditions and capitalist circuits of exploitation. And third and finally, this sketch of a new form of society emerging in the midst of an older one can – maybe surprisingly – be seen as part of a discourse (from Landauer to Marcuse to de Certeau) centered on the question of the immanent possibilities and the effective forms of resistance and counter-conduct within a given structure of power and domination.

Drawing the Figure of Power (around 1990)

It is not necessary in this context to resume either the overall argument or the different steps of the “Postscript on Control Societies”. I will confine myself to some remarks proceeding from my impression that on the more formal, methodological level, Deleuze is after something quite similar as Adorno in his project of a critical, interpretative social



philosophy.⁷ In broad strokes, Deleuze proceeds by amassing evidence for the diagnosis of a shift or transformation in the social structure and the forms of power inhabiting and stabilizing it. The method of this argument is formalist or structural, it lists and confronts different elements, types and forms of social relations and institutions along the line of discipline vs. control (leading to the following oppositions: analogical vs. digital [cf. D: 178]; confinement vs. dispersion; exclusion vs. inclusion [cf. 179]; finitude vs. infinity; “simple machines” vs. “thermodynamic machines” [cf. 180]; production vs. meta-production [cf. 181]; etc.).

All of these steps in the argument add to the suggestion that “we’re at the beginning of something new” (D: 182). But this new form of society is not just characterized by new technologies, social forms or institutions but by a change of shape of the social itself, of the way social life in general is organized and structured. This argument is based on the notion that societies are structures of power, entities that generate, distribute and manage possibilities and impossibilities, agencies and the limits to agency. Deleuze’s seemingly offhand remark that it is not easily possible to normatively rank the different types of society because there “is a conflict in each [system] between the ways they free and enslave us [*car c’est en chacun d’eux que s’affrontent les libérations et les asservissements*]” (D: 178 [242]) reveals a rather substantial social-theoretical axiom: In all societies, be they (following the Foucauldian lexicon) sovereign, disciplinary or governmental, or be they (following the traditional political semantics) hierarchical, authoritarian or liberal, there is a pattern or structure that administers legitimate and illegitimate, possible and impossible, normative and a-normative life.

In all cases, “freedom” (i.e. the empowerment and authorization to act and live in a certain way) and “enslavement” (i.e. the sanctioning and weakening of the excluded, discarded or delegitimated forms of life) are distributed systematically; all societies are regimes or machines of subjectivations that simultaneously “free and enslave”, that is, create the power to act as well as subjugate subjects and actions to power. But the modes, modalities or forms of this double subjectivation are different depending on the respective set of institutions, values, technologies or ideologies. It will make a difference whether the major subjectivizing mechanisms are organized around the law, or production, or natural features, whether there are more or less developed norms of scientific inquiry, theological authority or bodily pleasure placed at the center of a given society’s mode of operation. All these differences allow for a wide variety of forms of social organization and self-constitution. The task of a critical diagnosis is to bring to light the specificity of a given social formation.

⁷ References in the remaining body of the text mostly refer to the English version of the “Postscript on Control Societies” (“D” = Deleuze 1995). Phrases from the original French version (Deleuze 2003) are inserted in square brackets.



It is here that the Adornian idea or technique of the construction of the “figure” or “image” can help to elucidate Deleuze’s own methodology. Looked at from this perspective, the concept of “control society” itself would be nothing else than such a figure, a theoretico-diagnostic construction. It is meant to grasp and describe an emerging social formation that cannot yet be analyzed fully but that is starting to delineate itself in some key features that can be traced in the form of the open-ended list quoted above. The theorist or diagnostician, in this case Deleuze himself, draws this figure or profile, outlines a distinct entity that has not yet fully formed, that is far less substantial and “real” than it might seem; it is nothing but an image. But what it is an image of is the totality of social relations it is possible to think, made visible through those very features and their coherent, self-enforcing interconnections. In a “control society”, an increasing number of strata and levels would be structured and patterned by the imperatives of short-circuit control, psycho-affective activation and homoeostatic self-regulation that is characteristic of production and communication under the conditions of late and generalized capitalism.⁸

This diagnosis is not itself a theory, it is not a piece or result of “research” (A: 124]). Nothing in the empirical social world can verify or justify the ultra-strong claim that the totality of the social is structured in this (and no other) way. This is nothing more, but also nothing less than an “interpretation” (or *Deutung*), a theoretical construction intended to make sense of a given social formation, assessing its inner possibilities and impossibilities, its freedoms and enslavements. In other words, naming the present society the emergent site of a “control society” means drawing boundaries, marking off the old and the new, the distinctive and the accidental. The epistemic function of such a construction is to let us see what might be new or emerging in the present and what it might be like to live in a society that would have fully developed this shape or form or image. The political function of this construction is that it allows us to imagine the deep forces and powers that shape subjectivity, knowledge and self-understanding under such a regime and that assure its functioning. Imaging or envisioning these forces and powers that at the same time provide “new freedoms” as they produce “enslavement” (cf. D: 178) is not yet fully understanding, let alone combating them. It is only the first step to build up resources that might break their unnoticed efficiency.

Preparing Resistance

If it is plausible to interpret Deleuze’s text in such a way, and to impose the expectation of at least a sketch of such a construction on it, it may make sense to go even further in testing out the analogy. In Adorno’s case, the idea of a construction of an image or figure

⁸ For a compelling account of the enduring value of Deleuze’s diagnosis, cf. Mühlhoff 2018: 355-73.



of power or domination was framed in Marxist terms and was also meant to contribute to a perspective in which the hypothetical theoretical insight is related to the practical dimension of a struggle against a given power structure or regime of domination. Now, it seems that Deleuze rejects exactly these clear-cut terms and divisions and, here as in many other texts, opts for a much more immanent and apparently less normative perspective. He might share some aspects with Adorno's peculiar form of Critical Theory, but they seem to part ways at this point for good.⁹

But then again, it is striking to see how explicit some of the text's passages are in this regard. Be it the quest for "finding new weapons" (D: 178) or the blunt statement on the last page that the new society is nothing but "a new system of domination" (D: 182 [247]). And even the final passage is explicit in its political-practical point of reference: "Can one already glimpse the outlines [*ébauches*] of [...] future forms of resistance?" (Ibid.) But the caveat lies in the next sentence: "Many young people have a strange craving [*réclament*] to be 'motivated,' they're always asking for special courses and continuing education"; this can be taken to refer to the problem that even the impulse to learn, to advance and emancipate oneself might be rooted in the very mechanisms that serve to maintain the functionality of the new system. But, Deleuze continues, "it's their job to discover whose ends these serve, just as older people discovered, with considerable difficulty, who was benefiting from disciplines [*la finalité des disciplines*]." (Ibid.) This is not just the expression of a mild sympathy for the next generation which has to pick its own fight and experience its own disillusionments. It is a general philosophical lesson: The urge and resources for resistance will only be available from the inside of a given regime of power and domination. This will require specific defeats and disappointments but also processes of learning and detecting possibilities and loop holes.

Resistance, we might say, will therefore be a matter of immanence: it will be immanent to the structures of power against which it is to be yielded, but also immanent in the sense that no one else but the ones living under these regimes can figure out *how* to resist. So here too, but with a different meaning than in the Hegelian lexicon, the Nietzschean Deleuze proposes and opts for a kind of "immanent critique" (Deleuze 2002: 91). This refers to a resistance from within, which transcends neither its point of departure nor its object of critique completely. But if it is successful, it manages to transform both of them (and the resister/critic, too).

If these descriptions are at least partially plausible, we can attribute to Deleuze a type of critical theorizing that can be brought into dialogue with the project of an interpretative critical philosophy, as the young Adorno had envisioned it. While the systematic differences are of course considerable (concerning the status of the dialectic, the con-

⁹ On the controversial topic of Deleuze's stance towards questions of normativity, cf. Patton 2010, whose fascinating discussion of the subject may in fact strengthen my argument.



cept of totality, the conception of terms such as ‘power’ and ‘domination’, etc.), there is nevertheless a level on which the convergence is striking: Both projects are constructive, even poetic in that they insist on the philosophical and conceptual character of this Critical Theory even while it refers to the very specificity of a given social order. Both are organized around the problem of power and domination and read and treat society as nothing else than figures and instances of power. And lastly, both outlooks are skeptical, but not cynical, since the problem of power inherently, immanently, leads to the theme and possibility of resistance. The analysis of power in the last instance gives way to a reflection on the very possibility of not letting power have, as it were, the last word.¹⁰

Critical Theory after Deleuze

If this rapprochement between two seemingly distant perspectives has some value for understanding Deleuze differently, does this also hold true for the other way around? If Deleuze can be said to practice a kind of Critical Theory, how could this constellation affect the reading and rethinking of early and current Critical Theory? Let me just give some indications as to where these questions might lead.

Without doubt, the work of Foucault and Deleuze has raised the philosophical theory of power to a new level and this has revolutionized the very way in which power as a conceptual object can be understood and brought into theoretical contexts. While in a rather loose sense, both early Critical Theory and Deleuze’s thought can be said to be philosophies of power, the former more often than not remains rooted in a more traditional understanding of power and domination, with a clear-cut line between the having and not-having of power, unambiguous demarcations between the powerful and the powerless, and a rather simple view of the distribution of power resources.¹¹

While some of these aspects are connected to the Marxist core of early Critical Theory and hardly dispensable, others are rather contingent and might be said to unnecessarily block other perspectives. Reading Critical Theory with and after Deleuze may lead to ways of integrating the decentered, dispersed and differential character of power into the more robust class-theoretical register common to Neo-Marxism. Then it might also become possible to realize that not all figures that can be drawn diagnostically into the social matrix today will necessarily and exclusively refer to economic power and class struggle; there might be other lines of sexist, racist or imperial division, and there might even be a special place for a figure of migration or the migrant that may well appear as the most pertinent signature of our time.

¹⁰ For an extended argument of this point, cf. Saar 2018, 2020.

¹¹ For a comprehensive discussion of Deleuze’s concept of power, cf. Rölli 2017.



Adorno and his Marxist contemporaries understood themselves in strong opposition to existential philosophy and fundamental ontology (cf. A: 123-24, 30-31); this polemic affected their attitude towards ontological questions in general. It might be one of the most significant side-effects of the recent prominence of Deleuze within general social and cultural theory to enable a turn towards ontology beyond the narrow limits of orthodox Heideggerianism. While this is a theme more strongly developed in his more systematic writings, even the “Postscript on Control Societies” places heavy emphasis on the world-forming, constitutive and productive, i.e. ontological character of power. But this means that to account for a given form or type of power means to account for its constitutive-ontological effects, i.e. for the fact that it produces a certain social world and certain social agents or subjects and their mode of being. A critical social philosophy can therefore (also) entail a critical social or political ontology, and this will need to have conceptual and methodological implications many authors within the context of Critical Theory often shy away from.¹²

Finally, while the dialectical frame of early Critical Theory allowed for the conceptualization of the ambivalent nature of social processes, the Deleuzian insistence on the immanent character of social relations could provide a helpful corrective against idealist residua in political thinking. While some of the political ambitions of the early Frankfurt School are premised on a rather Manichean vision of society, with a dark force of domination holding down a class of disenfranchised subjects, it is only with a much more complicated and multi-dimensional picture that contemporary political hopes, ambitions and fears will find their full expression. What if every social order also rests on (some kind of) consent and acceptance? What if resistance remains tied to the forces it opposes and runs the structural danger of partially reproducing the very conditions it seeks to overcome? What if the affective constitution of modern subjects also rests on some form of internalized (even if frustrated) will to power, so that this psychoeconomy itself will potentially compromise all attempts to start totally anew, beyond hierarchy, beyond domination?

These are questions that do not lie completely, but largely outside the range of early and current Critical Theory (with notable exceptions); one can credit Deleuze (and others) for making them crucial and defining questions for social theory today. In the “Postscript on Control Societies”, the emphasis on immanence takes the form of a methodological imperative: to attack contemporary power, start from the ubiquitous surface elements of the newly emerging type of society (work relations, styles of communication, psychological motivations), map them, reveal their coherence and contradictions, try to picture them as a system. To understand and to struggle against this type of society, we

¹² For helpful discussions of the status of ontology in current political and social theory, cf. White 2000 and Strathausen 2009.



do not need to go beyond it. The resistance against it comes from its inside, from the immanence of its own power.

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