

***CAVEAT EMPTOR:***

**ON TIME, DEATH AND HISTORY IN LATE MODERNITY**

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## **Abstract**

This essay focuses on 'revivalism' and 'resurrectionism'. While the former is a sociological label for contemporary rituals of dying and death, the latter is instead a label for contemporary practices of historiographical representation. By exploring the formal and substantive similarities between 'revivalism' and 'resurrectionism', this essay offers a speculative reflection on the relationship between time, death and history in late modernity.

## **Keywords**

Death; time; history; Heidegger; Levinas; Gadamer

## Notes on Contributors

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This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

Friedrich Nietzsche

### **Bio-power, Revivalism and Resurrectionism**

What does it mean to be 'alive' within late modernity, when it is possible to claim a 'right to die' and call for a 'politics of death', without any hint of irony (see Riddell 2002)? How might a historian answer this question? Being dissatisfied with the facile and unreflective historicism of much contemporary writing on the history of the body and embodiment, which might be deployed to answer these questions, my research during the past few years has focused on the entanglement of historiographical practice, the practice of writing of and about times past, and bio-power, the co-constitution of power and subjectivity around embodied existence, 'life' (Palladino 2001; 2003a). More recently, I have shifted its focus from cultural constructions of 'life' to those of 'death', arguably the absolute negation of 'life' (Palladino 2003b). The reason for this shift is not a matter of greater empirical relevance to the questions posed above, but is motivated instead by the desire to

bring time more explicitly within the remit of my historiographical reflections. Today, the passage of time, the most distinctive and perhaps essential dimension of historical narrative, and death are so intimately related that questions about historiographical method and the possibility of historical thought then become fundamentally bio-political questions. In this brief, speculative essay, perhaps a preface to things to come, I wish to articulate my current thinking about the contemporary entanglement of bio-power and historiography by exploring, still more specifically, the uncanny proximity between 'revivalism' and 'resurrectionism'. The former is Tony Walter's sociological label for contemporary rituals of dying and death, as he accounts for them in *The Revival of Death* (1994). The latter is instead Raphael Samuel's perhaps intentionally provocative label for contemporary practices of historiographical representation, which he compellingly described in *Theatres of Memory* (1994).

### **Death, Time and History**

Let me begin this exercise by clarifying the link that I am drawing between death and the passage of time. In the wake of the widening rejection of any metaphysical foundations of knowledge, which is a major feature of contemporary, if not modern, culture, the passage of time has become a deeply problematic concept. In *The Politics of Time* (1995), Peter Osborne argues quite convincingly that such passage can no longer be conceived as the unwinding of a cosmic time-piece, which was first set in motion by God, nor can it be understood as oriented toward the realisation of either some transcendental or some immanent 'truth' of history. He then turns to Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenological reflections on time and being. Heidegger and Levinas argued that the thought of one's own death is unintelligible

because it is simply impossible to imagine one's own death. At the same time, this unintelligible thought shapes 'our' anxious awareness of the passage of time, by inviting reflection on being in the world while inexorably moving toward its so unfathomable and inevitable closure. In other words, the moment of 'our' death is, for Heidegger and Levinas, the limit and new ordering principle of post-metaphysical thought (Heidegger 1927, 1962: 297-311; Levinas 1947, 1987: 67-79). For reasons that I will soon try to clarify, I find this claim less than compelling (see also Lock 2002: 202-3; and Baudrillard 1976, 1993: 148-54). In the meantime, I would note that, in *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (1992), Zygmunt Bauman has extended the above insight into the thanatological foundations of being to argue that the 'scandal of death', scandalous because death is completely refractory to reflective understanding, organises all aspects of 'social life'. Such life, he argues, aims to deny the transience to which the inescapable death of the individual attests by seeking to secure some form of effective immortality. If death denies futurity, such futurity can be obtained through an act of collective imagination, and historical narrative is particularly important to this end. As Bauman points out, echoing a long tradition of historiographical thought, culminating in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), 'the war to colonize the imagined future is fought on the territory of the imagined past' (Bauman 1992: 55, 121-3. See also Gadamer 1960; and Pickering 1999). Strikingly, while Bauman's debt to Levinas is quite evident throughout *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Thomas Tierney (1997) has sought to emphasise instead Bauman's debt to Heidegger, notwithstanding the paucity of Bauman's references to the latter. As I eventually engage with a pivotal difference between Heidegger's and Levinas' phenomenological understanding of death, a difference which is very important to the thesis that I will be advancing with respect to the fate of historiography in late modernity, it should

become evident why Bauman must attach greater importance to Levinas than he does to Heidegger. At this juncture, it is more important to notice that Heidegger and Levinas' argument about the relationship between time and being, and, more indirectly, history as well, rests on a common and peculiarly modern construction of death, which should call into question the universality that Heidegger and Levinas attached to their argument.

### **A History of Dying and Death**

In *Hours of Our Death* (1977), Philippe Ariés noted, in the steadfastly secular terms of modern historical anthropology, that the death of the 'person' could be divided into the moment of 'biological death' and the moment of 'social death'. While the former is the moment when the embodied and still living individual exhales their last breath, the latter is instead the moment when the material body of this individual ceases to play any functional role in the organisation of social life. Ariés argued further that, in pre-modern rituals of dying and death, the person usually lived long after their biological death. A striking manifestation of this phenomenon, which, as Georges Minois (1995) has observed, survived long into the modern age, was the treatment of those persons thought to have killed themselves. These persons were put on trial after their biological death, sometimes months, if not years, after such death. If they were found guilty of 'self-murder', they were then publicly executed, and all traces of their being, which continued until the moment of execution, were gruesomely obliterated. Consequently, humbly preparing oneself for one's inescapable biological death, with regard to what might follow thereafter, was a major preoccupation. Ariés then characterised the modern age as increasingly concerned with bringing biological and social death to coincide. On his account, the



medicalisation of dying effectively sought to undermine the symbolic system within which the death of the embodied individual was embedded (see also Elias 1982, 1985: 12). While Ariés does not draw on the work of Georges Canguilhem, the fundamental shift within bio-medical discourse from a categorical opposition between life, that which *is*, and death, that which *is not*, to the location of the two on a continuum of physiological function, which Canguilhem articulated in *The Normal and the Pathological* (1966), certainly supports Ariés' narrative. Moreover, the same convergence of biological and social death consolidated the identification of the person with the living, embodied individual, as a pivotal, if contradictory, feature of modern existence. It is then not surprising that Émile Durkheim (1897) should have famously viewed suicide, the individual's arrogation of the right to police the boundaries between their own life and death, as a fundamentally important phenomenon to understanding the fraught place of the individual within the organisation of modern society. While these observations are far from incidental, and are in fact quite germane, it is more immediately important to note that Heidegger and Levinas' argument rests on just the modern, punctiform understanding of death outlined above, an understanding that denies any room for philosophical reflection on life after death as a matter of metaphysics. If death is anything, it is death. In a deconstructive aside, we might note that this is perhaps the one and only true self-identity. While I have already suggested how Heidegger and Levinas argument rests on a historically specific, rather than universally valid, construction of death, whose truthfulness none the less seems hardly contestable, contemporary developments in the bio-medical sciences demand a much more critical and reflective consideration of such historical specificity.

While Ariés noted that the 'living dead' began to haunt popular imagination apace with the medicalisation of death, as the latter sought to sever and erase the refractory symbolic links between the living and the dead, today the 'living dead' would appear to be more than just figures of an overwrought imagination (1977, 1987: 396-401). In *Twice Dead* (2002), Margaret Lock notes how the contemporary bio-medical concept of 'brain death' effectively reverses the pre-modern relationship between biological and social death. Today, the anthropological person is deemed to be legally, if not socially, dead when their brain ceases to function, but bio-medical technology can keep the rest of the embodied individual biologically alive almost indefinitely, or, at least, until transplant surgeons can remove their 'living' organs. If this currently is a phenomenon of limited social importance, the same cannot be said of the 'living death' experienced by increasing numbers of incapacitated people whose survival is tenuously guaranteed by their attachment to 'life support' technology, specifically the terminally ill and the elderly approaching the end of their lives. As Walter has observed, this 'unnatural' situation is resulting in the proliferation of discourses about the 'easy death', the 'good death' and, most basically, the 'right to die'. When the terminally ill and elderly are denied this last right because it supposedly is always better to be alive than dead, and they then reply that they are already 'dead', this is no longer a matter of histrionics, but a cause for advancing a 'politics of death', *pace* the Holocaust (see Barclay 2002; Riddell 2002). On the medical side, this all too earnest thanato-political discourse is translated into the explosion of 'palliative medicine' as a new specialisation that seeks to rejoin social and biological death by desisting from any attempt to prolong life 'needlessly', that is, by desisting from any attempt to prolong biological life beyond any hope of return to social life (see Seale 1998: 91-121). If this approach to the 'management' of death is in practice quite problematic, the medical profession, at least in Britain, adamantly refuses to

sanction the adoption of any measures that would intentionally accelerate the advent of biological death (British Medical Association 2001). It would seem that the great majority of the lay public has no such qualms. It not only denounces the hypocrisy of the medical profession, as the latter plays with intangible notions of 'intention' to legitimate the administration of drugs to relieve pain that in fact accelerate the advent of death. It also increasingly demands the legalisation of 'physician assisted suicide', if not the more general and unqualified legalisation of 'assisted suicide', to thus remove the last impediment before the realisation of the 'right to die' and the final fulfilment of the truly autonomous individual, in death (see Martel 2001; and Minois 1995). Strikingly, the arguments concerning medical practitioners' actual 'intentions' and legislators' insistence that, if allowed, 'assisted suicide' should be left in the hands of the medical profession, betray an inordinate confidence in the profession's understanding of the threshold between life and death, which is in fact demonstrably unwarranted (see Van der Maas *et al.* 1996). Such confusion notwithstanding, the net effect of all these changes is that the concept of the 'sanctity of life', the imperative to protect life as much as is humanly possible, which has long organised religious as well as medical discourse, is steadily being supplanted by the concept of 'quality of life', whereby it must now be recognised that death is sometimes preferable to a life reduced to bare biological function, to 'bare life' (see Singer 1994: 106-31; and Agamben 1995, 1998: 160-65).

The consequences of this cultural, if not historical, transformation of death for Heidegger and Levinas' arguments about time and being are quite profound. Arguably, if one can 'choose' death, one must in fact 'know' death. In fact, wherever 'voluntary assisted suicide' is legally sanctioned, any decision to terminate one's life cannot be enacted when the person requesting termination is adjudged to be

clinically depressed: 'tiredness of life' is not an acceptable reason for choosing death over life. In Britain, where 'voluntary assisted suicide' is still illegal, the same principle applies where a patient requests the withdrawal of 'life-support' (British Medical Association 2001: 25-6; and Law Society and British Medical Association 1995: 97-8). As such, legitimate and legally binding choice is understood as a positive affirmation, which can only be meaningful where there is some positive understanding of what is being chosen. In other words, 'death' now is far from Heidegger and Levinas' unintelligible concept. If this is to press the case too far, though it might be worth thinking what are the grounds for such scepticism, one might then note that, at the very least, the discourse of 'quality of life' so relativises death that it can no longer operate as the absolute post-metaphysical horizon that organises a modern, secular understanding of the passage of time and all that depends on it. Indirectly, one might then also wonder what are the consequences of this situation for a similarly modern, secular understanding of historical narrative and its own, distinctive temporal 'horizon', the 'end of history' (see Gadamer 1960). Let me address this last question by first articulating a few, further observations about 'revivalism'.

### **Revivalism, Resurrectionism and Formal Culture**

The contemporary prominence of discourses about the 'easy death', the 'good death', and the 'right to die' leads Walter and others to contest Ariés' thesis about the historical disappearance of death. Clive Seale calls it into question by observing that,

In a manner similar to the mortuary rituals described by anthropologists ...  
[contemporary mortuary rituals] ... offer both dying people and the bereaved an

opportunity for organised *resurrective* practice, whereby participants engage in relatively explicit affirmations of membership in the human social bond, in the face of its destruction by the death of a member (emphasis added).

Seale 1998: 144-5

What I would suggest, however, is that the resemblance of contemporary and pre-modern discourse that Seale thus advances, suggestively blurring the boundaries between ‘revivalism’ and ‘resurrectionism’, may be ‘formal’, rather than ‘substantive’. I draw this distinction from Alexandre Kojève’s amendments of his lectures on G. W. F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Strikingly, Kojève’s amendments, which aimed to revise his earlier account of the ‘end of history’ in the light of reflections on the formal culture of modern Japan, might as well have been based on Yukio Mishima’s nearly contemporary and quite spectacular, but politically ineffectual, suicide. To Kojève, the consummation of modern, formal culture was exemplified by *seppuku*, ritual disembowelment, now no more than a ‘perfectly gratuitous suicide, which has nothing to do with the *risk* of life in a fight waged for the sake of *historical* values’ (1947, 1980: 162 and 159-62). Thus, and the one hand, I would emphasises how pre-modern ritual of dying was oriented toward, and enjoined continuous reflection upon, an end, namely salvation on the ‘day of judgment’. More specifically, the ritual aimed to return the original, sacrificial ‘gift of life’ and thus realise the historical promise enacted by this founding sacrifice. Such symbolic exchanges, however, are no longer meaningful: ‘God is dead’ (Nietzsche 1887, 1974: 181). On the other hand, if the contemporary pervasiveness of discourse about ‘dying’ and accompanying rituals is undeniable, discussion on the meaning of ‘death’ itself is noticeably absent. Contemporary ritual is a discursive performance about an ‘empty centre’, so that noun and verb merge and ‘death’ becomes ‘dying’. Admittedly, the distinction thus

advanced is untenable, either because each signifier always has its own, ontologically distinct signified and referent, or because the signified and reference has always been the effect of play between different signifiers. I would note, however, that this polar opposition, a matter of much controversy within contemporary philosophical debate, may be the product of a particular historical situation, where formalism reigns so supremely that any distinction between the two propositions cannot but be a matter of endless argument (see White 1987; and Jameson 1991).

It seems to me that it is from just this perspective on the historical evacuation of the noun, the reduction of content to form and performance of form, that we might begin to unravel the paradoxical concomitance of denunciations of all the residual attachments to Judeo-Christian values, such as the 'sanctity of life', that stand in the way of 'physician assisted suicide', and the recent public celebrations of Diane Pretty's death with the words 'she is free at last' (Dyer 2002; see also Keown 2002: 282-91). This celebration begs so many questions about what is freed, freed from what, and in the name of what truth, that I would argue that it is not so much a contradiction, occasioned by the incomplete secularisation of contemporary society, but a symptom of evacuation. Like Mishima's suicide, the performance of Pretty's liberation was undoubtedly spectacular, but also hermeneutically void. Importantly, however, it was none the less productive: it sustained a burgeoning 'death' industry that increasingly allows us, if it does not actually enjoin us, to choose the timing and manner of our death, to the moral, if not economic, benefit of all (see Seale 1998: 4-5; and Hart, Sainsbury and Short 1998). This point finally brings me back to historiographical 'resurrectionism'.

Arguably, the hermeneutic evacuation of death that goes by the name of 'revivalism' is very similar to that of contemporary historiography. If the notorious 'end of history' thesis is somehow contradicted by a burgeoning popular interest in history, there is something quite striking about the democratisation of historiography that Samuel celebrates under the label 'resurrectionism' (1994: 139-202). The practices of historical reconstruction are increasingly ubiquitous and open to everyone, but reflection on irretrievable loss and the distinctively historical temporality that is marked by such loss, which Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the philosophy of history' evoked, is noticeably sparse (Benjamin 1940, 1973: 249). As with death, if historiography was once oriented toward understanding and living toward the end of history, the millennial realisation of either a transcendental or an immanent truth, the millennial realisation of a secular promise to redeem the losses witnessed by the 'angel of history', contemporary historiography is a performance about an 'empty centre'. If Seale can easily jump across temporal and spatial scales to equate contemporary mortuary rituals with both those of the past and those of other contemporary cultures, it is because the grounds for any fundamental distinction between the temporal and social locations of sociological and historical narratives, or between the historicism of contemporary sociology and the historicism of contemporary historiography, have today become very tenuous (see Osborne 1995: 13-20; and Castoriadis 1975, 1987: 167-220). In fact, the hold on a distinctive nature of the past is so tenuous that its cultural intelligibility now rests on the spatialisation of time and the literal equation of historiography with travel to 'another country' (see Alliez 1996). Moreover, historiographical construction becomes so much an end in itself that the signified, the past, and the signifier, historical representation, become synonymous. If the identity of the past and its representation happens to be less than persuasive, any divergence is a matter of methodological inadequacy, rather than

evidence of a haunting, irretrievable loss. Cautiously echoing Michael Pickering's recent reflections on the fate of 'tradition' within cultural studies and historiography, I would argue that the void at the heart of contemporary historiography is none the less productive, insofar as it sustains the burgeoning commodification of historical narrative as spectacular entertainment, again comparable to Mishima's suicide, a 'perfectly gratuitous suicide, which has nothing to do with the *risk* of life in a fight waged for the sake of *historical* values' (see Pickering 1998; 1999).

Admittedly, however, the similarity between 'revivalism' and 'resurrectionism' advanced thus far is simply formal, and the argument risks complicity with the very cultural phenomenon it seeks to both identify and criticise. This said, the pervasive individualism that characterises contemporary 'resurrectionism', as well as 'revivalism', as the former celebrates biography and other forms of empathic, identifying narratives, might be compatible with Heidegger's emphasis on the incomparable uniqueness of 'my death'. It is deeply incompatible, however, with Levinas' insistence that any understanding of 'my death', and all understanding of time and being that flows from it, is in fact predicated on the death of the 'other'. Importantly, the Levinasian 'other' is not to be confused with the anthropological 'other', a thoroughly modern co-constitutive, identifying device, insofar as the Levinasian 'other' is ontologically prior to the 'self'. It is the irretrievable disappearance of the Levinasian 'other' that occasions the melancholic awareness of a 'self' who would impossibly 'like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed' (see also Scott, 1991). Given this more 'sociological' perspective on death, Bauman's preference for Levinas rather than Heidegger is inevitable. More importantly, while I am unsure that Levinas would have approved of my Benjaminian reading of his writings, though his critiques of Hegelian historiography



and Pierre Hayat's commentary thereon are somewhat reassuring, it is noteworthy that the contemporary, thoroughly individualist redefinition of death can no longer ground a post-metaphysical definition of historical time as the time of the Levinasian other (Levinas 1980, 1994: 132-3; Hayat 1994: 15. See also Wouters 2002). From this perspective, the similarity between 'revivalism' and 'resurrectionism' is more than simply formal. As 'death' and the 'past' are transformed into performances about an 'empty centre, into 'simulations', these performances share in the more general cultural shift from 'symbolic exchange' to the infinite 'semiotic economy' of capital, wherein formal equivalence is the basis of exchange and accumulation (Baudrillard 1976, 1993: 6-49; and Jameson 1991).

### **The Endless Return of the Same, Tradition and Spectres**

Let me then begin to summarise these disparate reflections on 'revivalism' and 'resurrectionism' by noting that, if the 'end of history' thesis is incompatible with a burgeoning popular interest in history, it is also possible to understand such interest as spectacular, but hermeneutically void: historical, if not existential, time is no longer. This said, it is also striking that many of the terminally ill and elderly people that have contributed to the contemporary bio-medical articulation of a fundamentally different understanding of death, despite the difficulty of talking while in great pain, have done so because it lent some residual meaning to their otherwise meaningless death. It allowed these terminally ill and elderly people to think of themselves as living beyond their death, and for others. In other words, bio-medicine arguably offers a new version of futurity, a new version of life beyond death. In fact, acceding to organ donation is sometimes described as the 'gift of life'. Moreover, the theory of 'disposable soma', the notion that we are the disposable

vehicles for the reproduction of 'selfish genes', returns death to narrative, as something more than simple 'extinction' (see Kirkwood 2000). As Howard Caygill (2000) has noted, in his essay 'Surviving the inhuman', everything changes, but nothing really does change, in the endless return of the same.

On the other hand, I cannot help but note that the sacrificial language of organ donation as 'gift of life' is reinforced by utilitarian considerations, and by injunctions not to take this language of gift-giving too seriously, at least on the part of the organ recipient, as it might impair the efficacy of transplantation (Lock 2000: 320). In other words, this is an example of narrative under the sign of economy. The same can be said about the narrative of 'selfish genes' and 'disposable soma'. I then wonder whether the now widespread Nietzschean, post-metaphysical understanding of historical temporality as endless return of the same is not in fact the ultimate affirmation of a temporal mode that Friedrich Nietzsche himself, the 'last metaphysician', would have rejected. Contrary to many conventional readings, I understand Nietzsche's critique of modern philosophy as a call to fully understand what has been lost with the Kantian configuration of 'God', namely the loss of symbolic order and the consequent 'disenchantment of the world' (see Berkowitz 1995). Thus, I wonder more specifically whether these evocations endless return of the same are not unreflective affirmations of a smooth and endless chronological time, which formally resembles messianic time, the time between the 'end of history' and the 'day of judgment', insofar as our decisions are no longer governed by either some transcendental or some immanent historical logic. At the same time, these decisions are no longer properly decisive, sacrificial, as they might be if they were taken with regard to the possible realisation of a redemptive promise (Latour 1999: 242; and Agamben 2000: 99-140). Today, it would seem, every moment is an event,

the advent of the radically new, that which changes everything, but an event devoid of eschatological meaning. This is the 'empty' temporality that is both grounded by, and grounds the semiotic economy of capital.

It is on these grounds that I find Pickering's otherwise persuasive arguments about the impossibility of location and identification outside 'tradition' less than convincing (see Pickering 1999). While he effectively argues that contemporary evocations of 'tradition', disconnected as they are from any eschatological meaning, are performances around an 'empty centre', they are 'simulations', his appeal to the phenomenological reduction of 'eschaton', the singular event that orientates the articulation of a 'tradition', to 'horizon', which Hans-Georg Gadamer advanced in *Truth and Method* (1960), suffers from the same limitations as Heidegger and Levinas' conception of 'death'. Gadamer's 'horizon', which is fundamentally indebted to Heidegger's thoughts on 'death', is a limit without the symbolic figuration to which 'tradition' must speak, always inadequately because the figuration must impossibly be both universal and singular. Pickering's phenomenological turn, in other words, is complicit with the very phenomenon he sets out to criticise. This said, it should be noted that Levinas always struggled to draw a distinction between his own, distinctive and perhaps more productive phenomenological conception of the 'other' and the Judeo-Christian 'God' (Levinas 1984; see also Derrida 1992). It is no surprise then that our more uncompromisingly anti-metaphysical culture is obsessed with finding the disruptive 'trauma' in our lives or desperately seeks out the 'catastrophic' event that might somehow re-install signification and the meaning of history, but only once the appropriate commutation into therapy is at hand, be it in the form of the commodified rituals of 'revivalism' or of those equally commodified rituals that go by the name of historiographical 'resurrectionism' (see also Žižek 2002: 136-41).

Of course, this dynamic would be short-lived, if it were not that the impelling force, 'desire', never can be fully countered. The 'lack' that impels the continuous regeneration of the dynamic might then be understood as the ghostly presence to which Jacques Derrida speaks in *Spectres of Marx* (1993), to evoke the possibility of the messianism haunting Benjamin's melancholic lines, but without any Messiah. This, however, is once more a presence without symbolic figuration. As such, Derrida's 'spectre' suffers from the same limitations as Heidegger's 'death' and Gadamer's 'horizon', arguably universal, but fatally indeterminate renditions of the limit, of 'eschaton'. In sum, to re-install signification and the meaning of life and history we are going to have to reinvent 'God' ... *Caveat emptor!* (see Cassirer 1932, 1951: 182-233).

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