



PERFORMING RADICALITY. AN UNTOLD HISTORY OF POPCULTURE

To be radical is to grasp things at the root. But for man the root is man himself.
(Karl Marx, Introduction, *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*)

Pop culture and its tendency to blur the difference between use, self-use and misuse are regarded as key features to explain vital forms of recent radicalisations. My analysis therefore undermines the common distinction drawn between classic radicalness as elitist and unpopular vs. pop culture as common or vulgar forms of pleasure seeking by making three connected claims:

(1) Pop culture, that here dates back at least to the year 1832, when Jeremy Bentham's famous 'auto-iconisation' in London took place, has a hidden radical trait. This can be described as transforming the category of 'use' (usus) into an ubiquitous imperative without boundaries.

(2) Pop culture in the 21st century swallows radicalisations as separatist movements, paradoxically making the dangerous safe, and popular in disembodied spaces, e.g. in hate sermons in the anonymous refuges of the internet. While at the same time there is a tactile quest for the body, exhibiting new forms of unseen and unheard embodiments, which can be understood as voluntarily exposing the safe to the dangerous.

(3) Performing radicalness here means the conscious abuse/use of one's own body/life, thus becoming again unconditional and boundless, radicalness repopulates pop culture.

This study investigates why radicalness has recently become such an attractive role model to bloggers, hipsters, and funsters. Brought up under secular western auspices, many are radicalised yet shielded and protected by the digital anonymity of the Internet, some are even eager to kill and ready to be killed for the sake of a so-called 'Islamic State'.

The book insists on the crucial difference between radicalness and extremism that is to be willing to die vs. to be willing to kill for an idea. But reality proves to be more complex. The leading intuition is that performing radicalness leaves its traditional snobbishness and

seriousness behind when it becomes popular – and that is: a mass phenomenon. Interestingly enough, body and life, virtual and actual existence can merge in particular ways producing different forms of trouble. Many radical actions involve physical body contact, even self-mutilation to propagate the righteousness of the own cause; others embrace new forms of ‘beautiful trouble’, civil disobedience, and mockery under the reign of social media which privileges disembodied modes of anonymous contact. We thus find radical acts upon live and body – yet these are poles apart in terms of the embodiment spectrum.

Moving beyond the actual extremist debate which claims that all appearances of radicalness are the same, the book investigates radical structures as short-circuits bridging the theory–practice gap installed by Aristotle. It appears that the arrogation of radical structures is the wilful closure of the fissure between imagination and reality. However, the question remains: under which conditions does radical use or abuse occur – and what is the measure of its success?

The idea is to look at radicalness as open offense against the existing symbolic order in the areas of philosophy, the arts, politics and religion. How are these notions deemed acceptable or even desirable, while others are rejected? In philosophy radical doubt for instance is inherent to the notion of groundwork – a project that discriminates between fertile and infertile soil for thought – and thus is highly esteemed. Conversely, political radicals are easily discredited as extremists. Destructive impulses and creative urges act jointly in bringing an ambiguous figure of notoriety into being.

In what sense is the offensive structure of radicalness productive? Can one ‘choose’ to become a radical? Is radicalness especially linked to elites and avant-garde thinking?

According to Helmuth Plessner’s *Limits of Community* (1924), a radical accepts no restraints, forbids itself tact, disguise and the art of compromise. Plessner qualifies radicalism as the “faith in the healing power of the extremes, the method of opposing all traditional values” (Plessner 2002, 14). Rigidly ratio driven, its lack of love for life is the reason for remaining unpopular throughout history in Plessner’s eyes. But what if modern radicalism was both pleasure seeking and used techniques – such as masquerades and carnivalesque strategies – explicitly appraised by Plessner as distance-keeper, yet under very different auspices?

Rather than narrowing historical analysis to detailed knowledge, the aim is to understand the *structural imperatives* to and inherent threats of radicalness in contemporary culture. Therefore, I particularly draw on the notion of the human body and its radical use throughout history.

What links the pains of Christian martyrs to the artistic practice of Marina Abramović, voluntarily exposing her body to the limits of the unbearable? Does her 721-hour-long sitting-performance (*The Artist is Present*, MoMA, New York 2010) relate clandestinely to Jeremy Bentham’s ambitiously anonymous installation (*Auto-Icon*, University College of London 1832–present). Or are either endurance-pieces rather connected to the sitting protest of the

Wall Street Occupation Movement? Can cryptic links be drawn between the smirking Guy-Fawkes-mask in the hands of the Anonymous to the so-called Venetian *bauta*? The eerie white mask was worn from the 14th century onwards by noblemen disguised to protect themselves from a security state of their own invention and make social life again bearable.

These figures all explore the body as a powerful impersonal agent, entertaining the aesthetic signature of “implausible evidence” (Stanley Cavell) that proves pop culture’s latent radicalism. One’s own body, usually referred to as the most vulnerable and personal part of one’s self, comes to the fore as radical form of self-usage that bears witness for its very counter-use as impersonal, untouchable, and even sacred.

The volume cross-fades aesthetic strategies of actual protest culture with performance pieces of the 1970s and project them backwards to philosophical discourses. Namely: Aristotle, on self-education and *hexis*; Descartes, on hyperbolic doubt; Bentham, on self-iconisation; Stirner on self-consummation; Nietzsche’s cultural theory in the name of cruelty; Foucault’s ethics of existence, relined by the antic Cynics’ *parrhêsia*; Arendt’s difference of use vs. consummation; and Agamben’s appraisal of the radicalness of profanation. A synthesis of these philosophical works discloses how radicalisation and pop culture are secretly coupled.

My work will be interdisciplinary from its very start as its primary sources consist of heterogeneous material from different fields, namely performance art and its ephemeral artworks linked to philosophy (with Descartes, Hume, Bentham, mainly 17th and 18th century based); or bringing the cultural history of disguise techniques (Venice 14th-18th century) in closer contact to the digital bohemia (e.g. “Le comité invisible” and its two anonymously published books, *L’insurrection qui vient*, 2007, and *À nos amis*, 2014), and recent protest culture, as for instance analysed in David Graeber’s books on “radical action”. It thus entails not only a keen eye on actual developments in digital bohémia, including a survey of the discussions happening in art and pop magazines, even fanzines.

Its success is also depended on profound research in different archives, most prominent those of Venice (cf. Ignatio Toscani’s groundwork on the *bauta*). For one chapter of the book “1967f f. – Complex Mixtures, Impure Practices and Damaged Theories”, I am requesting access to the newly opened archives of the Deutsche Studienstiftung (Bonn), to investigate the radicalisation of the future members of the Rote Armee Fraktion (R.A.F.), namely Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin und Horst Mahler, long before the first killings started.

Why is my project new? Because radicalness and pop culture have never been conceived as co-dependant practices. On the contrary, traditionally, radicalness as part of a political avant-garde thinking, though not conceiving itself as art, would not look upon itself within the category of subversion. However, discerning historical waves of radicalness from multiple historical perspectives this study offers philosophy and cultural theory new ways to analyse forms of entanglement, and appraises pop culture in light of the consummation, mutilation and misuse of the self.

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- IV. YOU CAN'T SEE US FOR YOU DON'T KNOW US: Fun-oriented forms of social radicalization, or: the invention of effective, collective anonymisation by masking (Venice XXIIIth century – today) [SOCIETY]
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Francesco Guardi, Il Ridotto (Foyer), 1755

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I. Introduction: Radicality and Pop Culture or: The Ethos of Unconditional Self-usage

- 1) Short abstract, introducing four spheres of radicality as four forms of its inherent evaluation or judgement: art (necessary e.g. performance art and conceptual art), religion (e.g. ancient and modern martyrs with ambiguous outcomes), politics (mainly brand-marked as theory-driven, transgressive, contagious and evil for societies, e.g. in Helmuth Plessner) and philosophy (mainly as a founding figure, cf. Descartes' hyperbolic doubt (1641) and Hume's methodological stance (1748) /
- 2) Doreen Uhlig's *Gelamon 22/2* – exposing crucial moments of pop-culture: self-use a legitimate form of self-exploitation and -destruction
- 3) **Work definition No 1** following Julie Kuhlken: **pop culture as use, misuse and self-usage becoming ubiquitous and non-differential (random) / Leading hypotheses:** Pop culture effects /swallows radicalness and vice versa. Philosophical Aims of the study: a) to elaborate and profile the category of "use" opposite to "action"; b) contribution to the theory-practice-problem; c) to change the existing stereotypes on radicalness in order to think its phenomena, diversity and reasons anew.
- 4) Therefore: Brief exposition of **traditional radicalism**: becoming/being radical with every fibre of one's body as a proof of being absolutely determined / burning bridges / willingly paying the price / becoming an aim in itself / focusing on one's own example – and often one's body
- 5) Exposition of hidden, **'neo-liberal' form of radicalism**: performing radicalness locally and part-time/ defending one's ideals with various methods / acting clandestinely, using the digital age to disguise one's identity (masking as strategy) / "lulz" - and that is fun-orientated, pleasure seekers & gold hunters of the digital bohème
- 6) A necessary differentiation (**work definition 2**): to insist on a difference between radicalness and extremism: willingness to die vs. willingness to kill for an idea. But there are complex mixtures, probably even a continuum of deeds and doings, accidents and events that link radicalness to extremism. Radicalisation as a multilateral process is therefore under survey.
- 7) A brief note on **method**: Each chapter asks similar questions and yet expects different answers. / Very different sort of materials – *smuggled prison letters, mug shots and other pictures, court decisions, leaflets, unknown files from archives, banned or half-forgotten philosophical texts, art works, including ephemeral performances, films, audio evidence, medieval guides to self-chastisement, eerie leather masks from Venetian aristocracy* – become the basis of my analysis. I follow Elisabeth Bronfen in her idea of "cross-mapping" and superimposing these materials, to find Wittgensteinian "family resemblances" and hidden distinction marks. Questions that are left open in one chapter will hopefully find surprisingly fitting answers in following chapters, due to a slightly different angle provided by the heterogeneity of the material itself.

II. PHILOSOPHIE – RADICALITY AS FOUNDATION FOR PHILOSOPHICAL CERTAINTY

"Let me be cruel – not unnatural" (Hamlet): Radical thoughts as grounding figure, or: When uses become ubiquitous

Thinking as a form of acting (for the future); acting as a form of thinking (for the future): **Augustinus:** *Si fallor, sum.* (*De civitate dei*, XI. 26). Descartes' hyperbolic doubt as grounding figure for modern philosophy // **Jeremy Bentham's** radical philosophy and the after-life of his Auto-Icon (1832: the "Auto-Icon"-fragment as unknown intellectual groundwork for 20th century's installation and performance art [Side note on sitting performances] / Max Stirner: *The Unique One and his Property* (1944) // The essence of Pop Culture as a radicalisation of the category of "use" // Remarks on Hannah Arendt etc. pp.

III. THE BODY OF EVIDENCE: PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVISM – MONASTIC ASCETICISM and EARLY FORMS OF MARTYRDOM – PERFORMATIVE ARTS (Radicality as guidance for transgression)

Be my Pain! Ancient Cynics, Christian Martyrs and Performative Arts (linked to traditional radicalism: the body of and the body as evidence)

Back to zero: Abramovic: *Rhythm 0* (1974) // A scene with Diogenes in his tub: Michel Foucault's last lecture series at the Collège de France (1984) on *parrhêsia* and the Cynics // Foucault's move towards a philosophical and religious activism by the deliberate and infamous inversion of traditional themes // a note on shame, exposure and public insults on the occasion of **Diogenes** // // Early Christian Monks in the desert (3rd-5th cent. A.C.) // Marina Abramović and Uley in the Australian outback // / Heinrich Seuse's *Vita* (1362) on Elsbeth of Oye (ca. 1290–1340) / Marina Abramović: *Lips of Thomas* (1975) // Giorgio Agamben's praise of profanation as cultural technique

IV. COLLECTIVE SOCIAL RADICALISATION – MODERN PART-TIME RADICALISM

You can't See Us: Radical Collective Acts and the Invention of Effective Anonymity

(linked to 'new radicalism': evidence without an identifiable body)

Venetian Noblemen, a mask called *bauta* and the political dress code of the 14th century / Profanation as origin of the Venetian 'bauta', that probably began as an individual death mask and became a collective protest against the plague, therefore displaying no longer special features / What became of the **Guy Fawkes'** story: The Anonymous and Occupy Movement. TOR-Networks, Cryptoparties, Telekommunisten & Telecomics ... Creative and so-called 'beautiful trouble' in the digital age. Tactics of so-called 'Fun Guerilla' ('Spaßguerilla') (from DADA to Postmodernism?) // *L'insurrection qui vient* (2007), *Fuck off, Google* (2014) and *À nos amis* (2015) written by "un comité invisible": melancholy is no solution // branding radicalness and pacifism along each other (a hidden commentary / critic on Plessner?)

V. 1967ff. A COMPLEXE MIXTURE ("Gemengelage"): Happening & Radicalness, Extremism & Madness

Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin, Horst Mahler before the first killings, and the role of Bernward Vesper and Hans Magnus Enzensberger in comparison to them

1. Impure practices, damaged theories. A brief overview of the chapter
2. Emancipation and self-sacrifice?
3. Good reasons for radicalisation (privat/family-related, political, Vietnam, Springer Press, "Muff unter den Talaren", revolt against authorities in continuity of the Third Reich; escalation of the situation not only by the protestants, but also via law and order
4. Fall depth and explanation gap. The never ending story of G.W.F. Hegel and his notorious pupil Horst Mahler
5. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, the history of rebellion (Blanquis, Fanon, Débray,) and the loss of political reasons
6. Rhetorics of decision and politics of affects ("Leidenschaften"). A commentary on Plessner's writings of the years 1967 and 1968.
7. "Dear Mahler ..." (3. Juni 1969) – Letter of an Unknown Woman? An unpublished letter by Gudrun Ensslin to Horst Mahler, attorney of Baader at the time, smuggled by Otto Schily out of prison. Hashish appears here as a tool for rebellions and means against "Frustrationsstress" (frustration stress) (Gudrun Ensslin). Ensslin is revolting against Mahler's professionalism, his omniscience, his reluctance to use drugs for the sake of the "rebellion". Unlike Mahler, Ensslin justifies her disinterest in theory, even the dilettantism in performing "illegal actions" has good reasons. She describes herself being lazy and drug positive for the sake of mental health. She even gives a 'definiton' of non-cynical radicalness, hand in hand with quirkiness ("Schrulligkeit"). Quite a surprising document!
8. 'Zentralrat der unherschweifenden Haschrebellen' ("Central Council of the Hasch Rebels hanging about), Wieland-Kommune vs. Kommune I. Political defence and 'Fun-Guerilla-happening in opposition to elitist thinking (top down) of the later militant 'City Guerilla' ('Stadt-Guerilla').
9. Two Court Trials: What happened between July 1967/March 1968 (Leaflet trial against Commune 1) and October 1968 (Arson of two department stores in Francfort)? Two court trials with very different outcomes

10. The role of jurisdiction and the balancing act of the criminal attorneys: Horst Mahler, Otto Schily, Axel Azzola, Ernst Heinitz. How to argue for a right of resistance? Art. 20 GG as consequence of the German Emergency Acts (May 30, 1968)

VI. Radicalness as open offense against the symbolic order and attack of the gulf between theory and practice

Theory vs. praxis (four hypotheses) // *theoroi* as cultural agents in antiquity // When philosophers are accused of being 'just' theorists: Socrates being accused (by Aristophanes and others) of seduction and blasphemy ("theory as seduction") from the perch of his 'ivory tower' // Consequences for a theory that is regarded at the same time as dangerous, tame and futile // The invention of a productive and indispensable theory-praxis-gap by Aristotle // Gadamer's idea of 'hingerissene Anteilnahme' // Does building a theory include inventing a praxis of its own? // Where does the ignorance of a theory's performance in cultural history stem from? // The role of *theoria* in stoicism. Closure I: 360-degree-theories (Augustinus, Leibniz, Bentham) // Art and Science in Baroque. // Political Theories of the 19th century (Feuerbach, Marx/Engells) // Theories on praxis in modernity (Bourdieu, Kentrige, Warburg, Wyss // Migrating theories und travelling concepts (Eduard Said und Mieke Bal).

X. MECHANISMEN & MOTIVE Mechanisms and Motives of 'traditional' radicalness compared to 'neo-liberal' forms

Mechanisms: Burn the bridge (leave your family, your children etc.) vs. stay in touch. Avoid illegality as long as possible; becoming illegal vs. becoming anonymous; 24-hour-revolt vs. part-time radicalness; Strategy of terror vs. Laughter as powerful means

Motives: Radicalisation is in both cases as act against hopelessness, frustration, powerlessness? [Self-empowerment] / but it doesn't include necessarily holding a whole society as hostages, while promising to act in its favour // Radicalisation as **solidarity**? Collective self-defence? **Duty** not to disappoint? [Perverted Altruism] // Radicalisation as **counter-effectuation** and/or counter-action: Living other people's lives ... Doing anything (against Vietnam etc.) because their parents didn't do anything against Nazi Deutschland? "Ersatzhandlung & Schuldumkehr" (Substitute treatment & debt reversal) // Radicalisation as **last hope** to make sense of what doesn't make sense [Ultima ratio: Sense Making. Coherence. Consequence. Will to close the theory-practice gap]// making sense of what does not make sense: // "Schlagt kaputt, was Euch kaputt macht!" (Destroy, what's breaking you!) Destruction is an easy/cheap form of perverted or at least alienated 'creation' / Schelling on **evil and freedom**, or: **Radicalness & creation**.



Left: Andreas Baader with Gudrun Ensslin: Right: Horst Söhnlein, Thorwald Proll and Baader, during the trial for arson at two department stores in Francfort/Main, October 1968. – AP © 1968