

Research Article

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Raging Ennui: On Boredom, History, and the Collapse of Liberal Time

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Abstract: This article aims to outline a theory of political boredom based on the concept of the *liberal temporal dispositive*. According to this concept, modern politics is characterized by the reduction of political time consumption to enable the growing temporal autonomy of the individual. However, individuals may experience considerable stress in their pursuit to utilize this free time effectively. Boredom arises when individuals fail to “fill” their available time with meaningful actions. Political crises of boredom occur as attempts by individuals to relieve the pressures accompanying temporal autonomy, sometimes restarting political temporality on a new, massive scale. Furthermore, the article examines modern political philosophy as inherently rooted in the liberal temporal dispositive. Through several historical examples, it is discussed how political philosophy may either contribute to imbuing politics with a desire for meaning or abstain from it in an attitude of serene resignation. It is proposed that liberal democracy requires a temporal ethics based on the latter.

Keywords: liberal democracy, temporality, boredom, political violence, war, end of history

What to do now? Storm the capitol, summon the people: “To the trenches, the barbarians are coming to destroy our world!”
Stefan Zweig, “The Monotonization of the World” (1925)

1 Introduction

This study originates from a suspicion regarding the ongoing unsettling of the liberal-democratic order, including the part of the world where the author lives. The suspected cause of this unsettling of the order, the driving force behind a political style which does not shy away to break with the established formal and informal “rules of the game,” and even to resort to violence, which is not only unconcerned about escalating conflict, but deliberately searches the decisive showdown with the enemy, is of a more subtle and inconspicuous nature than the causes that are named in the bulk of the available analyses of the populist phenomena and the extremisms of the right and also partly of the left. It is neither located in the sphere of economic competition, the struggle of the middle class to defend its dwindling prosperity, nor in exclusion and resentment based on cultural capital, which, according to Andreas Reckwitz, plays an increasingly important role in today’s knowledge-based economies.¹ The driving motive suspected to be at work under the cover of the rhetoric of culture war, of economic or minority struggle, and which mixes with sentiments of injustice, disenfranchisement, resentment, and outright hatred to produce an explosive *mélange*, is hidden in the bottom of the heart, so to speak. It cannot be openly admitted without damaging the cause of the fight, and the

¹ Reckwitz, *The Society of Singularities*.

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subjects themselves might often be unaware of it, yet at times, signs slip through the filter of the legitimately sayable and reveal its workings. This hidden motive of political action is *boredom*.²

In light of today's mainstream political philosophy, boredom as an affective state might pose a peculiar object of reflection. Contemporary political philosophy is preoccupied with normative thought, with questions of justice and injustice in all spheres of society. Yet beneath the level of normative thought and rational argumentation lies a process of *experience* guided not merely by concepts and logical rigor but also by emotionally charged imaginations linked with cultural constructions of meaning. These can be reinforced by certain social conditions and, once they lead to actions, stand the test of reality or shatter when they collide with it. Political thought, as it occurs in the minds of a broad mass of political agents rather than political philosophers, is determined by this process of experience. Therefore, pursuing "purely philosophical," that is, purely normative thought free from historical, cultural, psychological, or sociological arguments, would barely provide interesting insights into the current political trends endangering liberal democracy. The injustice of the exclusionary logic of populist and extremist politics is relatively easy to demonstrate. However, it is hard to provide philosophical means to counter the affective powers and imaginations linked with this politics, which might stand, figuratively speaking, on an entirely different moral island, unreachable by one's arguments.

The task is to philosophically explore the origins of this suspected driving force in today's politics. In order to achieve this, the essay will pursue a methodical openness to non-philosophy. Boredom, as a political factor, has been previously viewed as a product of socio-economic circumstances and power structures by sociologists, historians, and anthropologists³ and has been analyzed as an emotional state that can lead to the development of extremist views by psychologists.⁴ The philosophical analysis of political boredom that we aim for is influenced by these empirical findings. It will however provide a genuinely philosophical perspective, drawing from *existential hermeneutics*. This perspective will also consider the historical context of the phenomenon being described. Boredom, is anchored in a specific historical and social reality. It represents a certain form of temporal experience that is essentially a social and historical construct. As an affect – potentially a "super-affect" that conditions other emotions – it can become constitutive of our relation to the world, influence our moral disposition, and thus, our political actions. Extreme boredom means a profound discontent with one's situation a certain estrangement from the surrounding world that has nothing to offer anymore, from the values and ideals that one has been adhering to. This boredom can push the subject to a point where it might resort to extreme measures to escape.

As shall be argued, boredom is not merely a contingent affective state or *mood*⁵ that might occur to the subject or not but a part of the subject's disposition as a being directed at the world, pursuing not only its desires and needs but also *meaning*. For philosophy to adequately grasp boredom, which, as mentioned, is presumably an underrated motivational factor for current, explosive political developments, it has to reach these kinds of motivations that are more primordial than the sphere of normative thought. Populist nationalism, for example, does not care for established norms of civility, divides society into friends and foes, and carelessly, even deliberately, provokes escalation. The big question here is: what is driving more and more people to *abandon* basic moral notions that one has assumed are firmly established and part of the common

² For more extensive philosophical discussions of boredom, refer to Große, *Philosophie der Langeweile*; Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*; Wüschner, *Die Entdeckung der Langeweile*; Zouhou, *Les vies dans l'ennui*.

³ Barbalet, "Boredom and Social Meaning;" Gardiner, "Henri Lefebvre and the 'Sociology of Boredom';" Mains, "Neoliberal Times;" Majumdar, "Boredom and the Banality of Power;" Prisching, *Die zweidimensionale Gesellschaft*, 109–34; Ringmar, "Attention and the Cause of Modern Boredom;" Auerbach, *Imperial Boredom*; Ohlmeier, *Langeweile ist politisch*. An excellent and accessible historical account of the phenomenon of boredom is Toohey, *Boredom*.

⁴ Cf. Van Tilburg and Igou, "Going to Political Extremes in Response to Boredom."

⁵ In this article, boredom is both referred to as an "affect" and a "mood." The difference between both is conceived of as a difference in graduality, rather than in quality. Karl Jaspers has conceived of *affects* as complex emotions of great intensity that tend to express themselves immediately in physical reactions, whereas *moods* are complex emotional states of longer duration and lower intensity which, however, can give the totality of psychological life a certain "color"; Jaspers, *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*, 78. Jaspers's definition has been used in Andrew Sims psychopathological standard work; cf. Sims, *Symptoms in Mind*, 305.

sense in our liberal democratic societies? They do it, as shall be argued, because it appears promising in their quest for meaning.

This pursuit of meaningful action cannot be separated from the subject's insertion in what might be called a *temporal dispositive*. Boredom is the effect of a *form* of temporal experience that, as a form, is transindividual and socializes individual experience to direct it toward a social and political system of institutions and institutionalized practices, which only operate if a corresponding disposition has been created in the subjects. Boredom is a mood that permeates the subject and, in order to fulfill its needs, directs toward the institutions of society, or, in what could be called *crises of boredom*,⁶ turns against them. One can understand this profound rootedness of boredom in a critical sense, i.e., in the sense of Maxim Gorki, who, in a piece written during a visit to the United States, states that in capitalism and consumerism, the satisfaction of *ennui's* demands becomes the very essence of happiness.⁷ Not only material wants, satisfied by the industrial production of never-ending novelties, but also spiritual needs echo boredom as their hidden root: the need for the constant production of the new, leading to the periodical proclamations of aesthetic “revolutions” or scientific “turns,” to the discursive simulation of dynamics where change is not the product of the production of meaning but is itself that which endows meaning. However, one can also conceive this in a less critical way; one may think of the modern value of personal development and growth through experiences and the difficulties in perceiving a static form of life in any other way than as boring in light of these values.

The boundaries imposed on the realm of politics are of key importance for this temporal dispositive. Boredom, understood in this comprehensive sense, is not merely part of the temporal foundations on which politics takes place but also of political thought in a narrow sense. Heidegger's intention in his analysis of boredom was nothing less than to understand boredom as an origin of philosophical thought.⁸ In this sense, political philosophy itself can be analyzed as rooted in the *fundamental mood* of boredom. According to this perspective, political philosophy is an arena where the subject struggles with the limits of meaningfulness experienced in boredom – a limitation found in the constraints of the political. The problem of political boredom, as will be shown, implies the problem of the limits of politics. This article will, after analyzing the notions of the liberal temporal dispositive and the crisis of boredom, attempt to exemplify the idea of philosophizing that struggles with boredom and is itself symptomatic of a crisis of boredom by engaging with the political thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, Alexandre Kojève, Francis Fukuyama, and Martin Heidegger.

The main interest of this study, however, is not historical but rather the suspicion that we are currently living through a crisis of boredom ourselves. Besides the presence of an increasingly provocative and escalating style in current politics, the trend to interpret politics in existential and heroic terms and the rising popularity of authors such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, and Yukio Mishima – mostly, but not exclusively, among adherents of the New Right⁹ – can be seen as indications of such a crisis. Liberal political philosophy, in order to counter the dangers arising from such an existential framing of politics, will have to leave the heights of normative thought and engage with the existential substratum of politics. Its reaction will have to be different from the strategy of dismissing this kind of thought as irrational, logically untenable, and thus philosophically worthless. If it does not, it will be overtaken on its non-academic fringes by a thought that better serves widespread spiritual needs. More than merely describing the workings of political boredom, political philosophy as a practical philosophical thought must develop a stance toward the existential dissatisfaction experienced in boredom. As a political care for the soul, as

⁶ For the connection between boredom and violence and the disruptive political potential of boredom, refer to: Anderson, “Affect and Critique;” Kustermans, “Boredom and Violence;” Kustermans and Ringmar, “Modernity, Boredom and War;” and Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, 242–51. The study goes beyond these important and inspiring analyses in introducing the notion of the liberal temporal dispositive in order to systematically understand the societal and political “conditions of production” of boredom. It further considers the special role of philosophy in the politics of boredom and the practical question of finding an attitude toward boredom in the discussion.

⁷ Gorky, “Boredom.”

⁸ On Heidegger's Analysis of Boredom, cf. Beistegui, “Boredom;” McKenzie, “Governing Moods.”

⁹ Cf. Wagner, *Die Angstmacher*. See also Rose, *A World After Liberalism*.

conceived by Socrates and later by Jan Patočka,¹⁰ it will have to become a thought that understands the suffering boredom can entail, takes it seriously, and addresses it in a search for other ways to deal with it rather than turning politics into a projection surface for a quest for existential meaning.

2 What is Boredom? A Brief Outline of an Answer

It will be helpful to sketch a definition of boredom before diving into the discussion of its political dimensions. Boredom, undoubtedly, is a certain mode of temporal experience – one that is, rather than being directed at the future or the past, directed at the present that is somehow experienced as unsatisfying. Boredom is essentially a negative emotion, a form of dissatisfaction accompanied by sentiments of unease, restlessness, or even stress, without being caused by the impact of something external. It is triggered not by the presence of an object but rather by the sentiment of an unspecific absence. In the present moment that bores us, something is missing; there is an emptiness, and although there might be things happening around us, these things are not able to fill the emptiness we are experiencing. We might try to help ourselves by occupying ourselves with something at hand in a given situation: some game or intellectual challenge, maybe a sudoku puzzle or recalling one's mother-in-law's birthday, that demands our attention and absorbs energy that would otherwise be uncomfortably hindered from being directed at something. This behavior presupposes that in boredom, we are anticipating, or rather “appresenting,” as Husserl would put it,¹¹ another mode of experience that would be, compared to the empty present, full and rich.

This state of mind can occur in different grades and dimensions. The trivial, ordinary form of boredom occurs when we experience an interval of inactivity as part of an overarching process of action in which we are engaged, such as having to wait in a doctor's waiting room without a book or a smartphone with a dead battery. This situation might be unpleasant, but it would be an exaggeration to say that one properly suffers in it since there is a clear anticipation of a future where the emptiness will be overcome and replaced by a more satisfying experience. The boring situation is only a passage between one full situation and another; it is a necessary evil that is bearable in light of what can be expected to come. Boredom only becomes a source of suffering when the “other” state of things vanishes from the future horizon, transforming the boring situation from a mere passage into a permanent, overarching condition. The subject then becomes permanently detached from the surrounding world and from the events and options of action available to it there is no foreseeable future that would make the present bearable as an unpleasant delay leading to a satisfying end. It is also unable to distract itself or find an activity that could occupy the present as a substitute for the lack of engagement with the world and its occurrences, perhaps because, as a surrogate for the engaging event, encounter, or action, distraction can only “work” if it is not required indefinitely. In this state of aggravated boredom, one has, so to speak, lost track of time.

In our quest for a definition, it is well advised to refer to psychology. Boredom certainly is a field of study where the disciplinary boundaries and competencies are blurred, as is the case in one of the research strands which is primarily occupied with it and which is particularly close to the approach in this article, namely moral psychology.¹² Boredom is “the state of suspended anticipation in which things are started, and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for desire,”¹³ as the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes based on his observations of children. The basic, limited form of boredom, which psychologists call “state boredom” and which can be identified with the first form of boredom in Heidegger's famous phenomenology of boredom, “becoming bored by something,” is a circumscribed situation that offers no means for a momentary escape but is expected to end in a foreseeable future. Troubling in a more profound sense and of real philosophical interest is only the second, unbounded form of

¹⁰ Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 109–30.

¹¹ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §§ 50–62.

¹² Cf. Elpidorou, *The Moral Psychology of Boredom*.

¹³ Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, 71.

boredom, where the subject makes the troubling experience that it cannot identify a specific object or situation as the cause of its condition and neither can find an object that would help it to escape from it, an object that would be worth acting as an object of anticipation. For the subject, the totality of its existence is then shrouded in this mood. One could describe boredom as an *inhibition* of the bored subject's intentionality that can no longer attach itself to objects in the mode of wanting and desiring. As long as it still has a "wish for desire," it "restlessly" looks for a way out of boredom to which it is stuck; it wants to recover a world that is filled with promises of satisfaction. Psychologists call this sort of boredom "trait boredom," meaning that boredom is no longer an affect restricted to a certain temporal phase but becomes an emotional disposition of the subject, fully deploying its aforementioned character of being a super-affect that colonizes the whole affective landscape of the subject and hinders other emotions from emerging or flourishing. It is also very close, if not identical, to what Heidegger describes as the third form of boredom, "deep boredom,"¹⁴ which will be discussed in a later part of this article.

Now, according to Phillips, even if it might entail a certain amount of suffering, the child's rebellion against the boring situation is a precious moment that the adult must not "sabotage" by offering the child distractions. Moreover, it is a phase of "free-floating attention"¹⁵ where the subject reexamines and potentially rearranges the surrounding world. It might, in a random procedure of trial and error, find itself absorbed by a play that was not at its disposal as an option for action at the outset of the boring situation. Further, it is a psychologist's observation as well as a *topos* repeated by poets that boredom contains the spark of creativity. In its "free-floating attention," it might reconstitute itself as a desiring being; it learns that not the world in itself is boring but only the habitual and ingrained modes of playing, writing, or planning of what is conceived as a meaningful, good life. Accordingly, Heidegger bases a whole philosophy of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) on the notion that boredom must be appreciated as a mood that shows us a way out from our lostness in the conventional, the established order of things and opens a path to our very own existential possibility.¹⁶

In this view, which we can call optimistic, boredom is not merely a condition passively endured by the subject; rather, it contains the capacity for individualization and autonomization. For Phillips, "boredom is integral to taking one's own time,"¹⁷ and insofar as adults misguidedly attempt to relieve a child from the misery of boredom by forcing its interest toward something sufficiently absorbing, the actions of the adult are oppressive in their effects. Regarding the artist, one can argue that only one's inclination to become easily and extensively bored might initiate true artistic originality, as it compels one to break with established modes of expression and explore new paths. In contemporary pedagogy and even workplace management, accordingly, phases of boredom are deliberately integrated into work procedures to induce creative thinking.

However, this productive reaction to boredom, so cherished by today's knowledge economy, is not the only possible reaction. Another way to reshape the objective world from which one feels detached in boredom is to defy the rules or laws that constitute it, aiming to create an order that may be more chaotic and dangerous yet also captivating. By detaching the subject from the surrounding world, boredom also devalues the goods found in it, making bored subjects willing to risk their loss. This feature makes boredom significant for moral and political philosophy. It is why *acedia*, the conceptual predecessor of the modern term boredom, was regarded as a cardinal sin by medieval theology. *Tristitia de bono divino*, the lack or inhibition of joy in view of a divine good, which the world is, expresses a lack of appreciation and disrespect for the creation as well as its creator, leading to a half-hearted pursuit of religious duties by the monk.¹⁸ This is also why crimes committed simply out of boredom are subjects of numerous works of modern literature, ranging from Ludwig Tieck's romantic novel *William Lovell* to Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* and including Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*, from which the following lines are taken:

¹⁴ For the differentiation of "state" and "trait boredom," refer to the following enlightening overview of conceptions of boredom in psychology: Elpidorou, "The Moral Dimensions of Boredom;" and Elpidorou, "The Bored Mind is a Guiding Mind."

¹⁵ Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, 72.

¹⁶ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, §§ 19–38.

¹⁷ Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, 73.

¹⁸ I follow Michael Theunissen's interpretation of *acedia* here; Theunissen, *Vorentwürfe der Moderne*.

But among the jackals, the panthers, the bitch-hounds,
 The apes, the scorpions, the vultures, the serpents,
 The monsters screeching, howling, grumbling, creeping,
 In the infamous menagerie of our vices,

There is one uglier, wickeder, more shameless!
 Although he makes no large gestures nor loud cries
 He willingly would make rubbish of the earth
 And with a yawn swallow the world;

He is Ennui! — His eye filled with an unwished-for tear,
 He dreams of scaffolds while puffing at his hookah.
 You know him, reader, this exquisite monster,
 — Hypocrite reader, — my likeness, — my brother!¹⁹

If boredom harbors the potential for creativity and individualization, it also, as Baudelaire's poem indicates, has the power to induce moral perversion, seducing the subject to choose the path of destruction and moral evil just to escape the unbearable detachment and emptiness of the ever-boring world. Following the insights of poets and philosophers, as will be shown later, violence and war become, for the profoundly bored subject, goods preferable to the peaceful order of everyday life – simply because they have the ultimate capacity to create events that fill the void of the present and absorb the subject's intentionality.

3 Boredom and the Temporal Dispositive of Modern Politics

The observation of these two polar modes of escaping boredom – one productive, one destructive – leads to the question of competencies and means in dealing with boredom. It shall be postulated here that boredom becomes a societal and, subsequently political problem because of the unequal distribution of the ability to deal productively – which in a society of work and self-realization also means *meaningfully* – with boredom. This inequality becomes all the more problematic since the amplification of boredom is a key productive factor in capitalism and consumer society, which depend on fast dissatisfaction with the acquired and the longing for the new. A certain kind of trait boredom, as a common feature of subjects, is functional and desired within the framework of a consumerist society. Our capitalist societies are surely ambivalent in this aspect; as mentioned above, they highly value the creative and innovative impulses that can arise from boredom. Contemporary, knowledge economy-based capitalism relies on creators who get quickly bored with their creations, more than Fordist capitalism with its serial mass production and certainly much more so than pre-capitalist artisanal production. On the other hand, it equally relies on the existence of a mass of consumers who are not able to deal productively with boredom and rely on the passive act of consumption, where acquiring a new product brings relief from dissatisfaction with the old.

The exposure to boredom in the system of consumerism is fairly general, but there is a class divide reflected in the capacity to deal with boredom. An elite group can productively take advantage of boredom while the majority struggle to do so. In addition to these two “classes,” there is a third one that falls outside the framework of this interaction where boredom is constantly produced and unmade: those who do not have the economic means to participate in it and those for whom state boredom has turned into limitless trait boredom, where there is no longer hope that the burden of boredom could be lifted by a change of situation or the introduction of a new object of consumption. This is the situation of the overfed, those who have everything too easily at their disposal, and those whose deviant, *perverse* desires²⁰ transgress the offerings of the market.

¹⁹ Baudelaire, “Au Lecteur/To the Reader.”

²⁰ On the relation between boredom and moral perversion, refer to Lars Svendsen's enlightening discussion of Ludwig Tieck's *William Lovell* and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*; Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 59–81.

With this, we have already indicated the essential nature of a political crisis of boredom. However, before considering the latter in detail, we must elaborate on how modern politics created a certain institutionalized temporality – a temporal dispositive – that is a condition for the prevalence of boredom in Western secular, liberal societies like the one in which the author is rooted, and that is under attack when boredom becomes a dominating source of political imagination.

Boredom is a mood that cannot arise under all circumstances but depends on certain preconditions. For boredom to arise, the subject must be unburdened by the most acute struggle to survive. Someone who finds themselves in such a situation is not merely absorbed by the effort that has to be made and, in the presence of danger, fully focused on preventing any fatal mistakes. In the defense of one's life, one's intentionality is directed toward a value forceful enough to motivate action. In fact, as mentioned already, seeking out danger as a “regressive” way to escape from boredom – one might think of activities such as extreme sports or highly risky gambling – can be understood as an attempt to regain by endangering the own life, an intense sense of value that captivates one's mind and activates one's efforts and forces. People who have been exposed to dangerous situations regularly can, in a way, become addicted to danger and the joy of survival while feeling uneasiness and boredom in everyday life.²¹

The securitization of the subject's biological time – the temporality of *zōē* – is the precondition for the unfolding of boredom as a preoccupation with existential time – the temporality of *bios*. Furthermore, since boredom as an intentional detachment from the world implies the *appresentation* of a state of fullness that, even though not objectifiable as a concrete action, event, or thing, is co-present in the experience of the boring situation as the “other” against which the present is measured as boring, boredom relies on the capacity for transcending the given. For boredom to become more than its restricted variety, which is merely a passage in the flow of everyday life's time, and take on the dimension of an existential mood in which *life itself*, meaning the totality of one's life's past and expectable future events, appears as boring, it is of the utmost importance that one's lifetime is regarded rather as a resource at one's disposal to be actively used than as a prestructured, predefined course. This is a concept of time that is not applicable to all cultural and historical contexts, especially not to those where temporal experience is religiously regulated. It is, however, typical for the subject as it developed in Western modernity. It may be mentioned here that with this freedom to use one's time, there also comes the subject's responsibility to use the time at its disposal well and not waste it. Therefore, the sentiment of frustration is typically inherent to the experience of boredom. In a boring situation in which the subject finds itself stuck, it sees itself as impotent to put the moment to good use and achieve the fullness it considers the ideal standard. Heidegger's philosophy perfectly expresses the tension between boredom and the phantasm of fullness that haunts the modern subject. Here, existential analysis leads to the demand to delve into an all-encompassing “deep boredom,” but not to resign oneself to it and accept it as part of life – the attitude which he describes as the second mode of boredom in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* – but in order to regain the “authentic possibility of [one's] existence,”²² which seems to be characterized by fullness in relation to the profane temporality of the everyday.

Now, besides societal, cultural, religious, and technological factors, the political sphere must contribute to producing the basic preconditions for boredom to unfold. One can find this connection between time and the state in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. The social contract, the erection of the state, and submission under the Leviathan introduce a new temporality; the time of war is replaced by the qualitatively new temporality of peace. “For *Warre*, consisteth not in Battell onely,” as Hobbes writes in the 13th chapter of the first part of the book, “or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known; and therefore the notion of time, is to be considered in the nature of *Warre* [...]”²³ It is appealing to understand that this passage suggests that war, for Hobbes, not only has the character of a temporal continuum and does not merely consist of battles as isolated events, but also consists of a certain mode or quality of time itself. In this temporal mode, contingency reigns absolutely; the future is entirely uncertain and thus unusable for

²¹ Cf. Rubinstein, “Danger Erotization, Adventure, and Addiction to Adrenaline.”

²² Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 153.

²³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 185f.

human endeavors – “industry,” as Hobbes writes, working agriculture, international trade, “commodious building,” “knowledge of the face of the earth,” the arts, letters, and finally “society” – other than fighting since those endeavors require planning and thus available time. Time, in war, is not merely unusable since it is full of uncertainties but also in short supply; not only must men live without the aforementioned goods, but also, “which is worst of all,” with “continual fear and danger of violent death.” The “life of man” is not only “solitary, poor, nasty, and brutish” but also “short.”²⁴

The state of war consumes time that would be multiplied and set free for more productive use once peace is achieved by means of the Leviathan. By liberating time from its consumption in war, the state creates the most basic resource needed not only for building civilization and wealth but also for realizing autonomy. In war, time is characterized by the warring subject’s reciprocal dictate of the course of things; it is used up by the actual fight or the preparation for it. The subject stands under the permanent obligations derived from the task of prevailing in the fight; the enemy, so to speak, imposes itself as the content of my days and my doings.²⁵ Of course, besides the chaotic war of everyone against everyone else, the organized state, potentially clashing with other states in pursuit of its own transindividual goals, is potentially itself a great consumer of time. Yet for Hobbes, the state’s task is not to keep the subjects occupied by leading wars but to grant them the disposability of time to pursue their own private goals. It is by decreasing political time consumption that individual liberty is expanded.

The liberal temporal dispositive, therefore, is a mechanism of temporal distribution. It developed with the rise of bourgeois society in the lap of absolutism and has determined the evolution of the bourgeois state since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The dispositive is understood as an ensemble of social (political) institutions, discourses that guide action and give practical orientation, and subjective attitudes that are formed by the latter and acted out in a network of institutions.²⁶ It encompasses three major elements: 1) the public sphere in the broadest sense, including the state, the law, and the activity of politics respectively governing – the domain where temporal resources are acquired; 2) the private sphere, namely the economy with its spheres of work and consumption, but also the increasingly important culture of self-realization – the domain where temporal resources are put to use; and 3) the discursive domain, where the meaning of this specific arrangement and the use of time are articulated, where the “wisdom” of this specific temporal dispositive is made explicit. As will be argued later in this article, philosophy plays an important role here.

In Hobbes’ proto-bourgeois and, in some aspects, proto-liberal²⁷ political thought, the essential task and working of the liberal temporal dispositive, as well as the relation of state/politics, time, and individual autonomy inherent to it, are already established. One could argue that politics has not stopped, and still, even in pacified liberal democracies, politics has the character of a time-consuming struggle and even fight, determined by the resistance an adversary puts up, and therefore still contains the heteronomous temporality of war even after the state of nature. This is indeed true. However, the liberal temporal dispositive does not demand a complete cessation of politics; rather, politics is functional in relation to the individual’s temporal autonomy. The expansion of the latter is a primary rationale of politics, and the state has gone far beyond the basic securities that the Hobbesian state offers in pursuing this goal. As Durkheim writes in his *Leçons de sociologie*, the modern state – it was the developing liberal and democratic state in mind – no longer produces its own ends – “mystical” ends, as the French author writes, such as the glory and honor of the nation – but has as its end the provision of the means individuals need to pursue their own goals.²⁸ The state is thus a means of appropriation of time by individuals, and if there is a “success story” to tell about it, it is the story of its ability to work as such a means. Political time is nothing but an extension of the individual’s temporal sovereignty,

²⁴ Ibid., 186.

²⁵ One can assume that after long periods of animosity, a similar “addiction” as in the abovementioned case of danger can develop. Schmid, *Vom Nutzen der Feindschaft*.

²⁶ Deleuze, “What is a Dispositif?,” Agamben, *Qu’est-ce qu’un dispositif*.

²⁷ Wilkins, “Hobbesian Liberalism.” Of course, the use of the term “liberal” in connection with developments that date back to the 17th century is somewhat anachronistic. However, in the thought, Hobbes already lie the germs that would develop in later thinkers’ ideas and in liberal politics proper.

²⁸ Durkheim, *Leçons de sociologie*, 66.

and *history*, once the domain of warring states and emperors striving for greatness, is absorbed by the mundane temporality of society.

Paradoxically, this functionality is even applicable to some of the most time-consuming politics of modernity, such as the French Revolution and, even more so, Communism. If one reads Marx's visions of the communist society, one finds a utopic idea of perfect, absolute temporal autonomy; work, the great consumer of time and creator of heteronomy that, according to Marx, all bourgeois liberal theoreticians failed to see as such, is reduced to a minimum, and the inhabitants of the "realm of freedom" use the large quantities of time without any outer constraints.²⁹ Individual self-realization replaces Hobbes' "industry" as the content of the released time. Politics, which would also be a remnant of the "realm of necessity," basically disappears too and is transmuted into a pure "administration of things,"³⁰ which serves the individual use of time. To achieve this utopia, communism claimed the right to use society's entire resources in the process of revolution and, thus, the right to submit the individual's temporal sovereignty. However, self-legitimation remained within the framework of what is called the liberal temporal dispositive here; it totalized political temporality in the name of a future totalization of individual time.

4 Crises of Political Boredom

One could describe the implementation of the liberal temporal dispositive as an attempt to fix the *dimensions* of the realm of politics, which, by excluding the possibility of time-consuming violence – including violence that was conceived as a shortcut to full temporal autonomy of the individual and then devoured temporal resources with a voracious appetite – also excludes values and modes of life connected with violence. Hobbes says in the chapter of the *Leviathan* cited above that it is not merely for creaturely goods such as material gain or safety that men fight, but for immaterial things such as the aristocratic values of "glory" and superiority in "competition."³¹ Therefore, war is not only an ugly and brutish reality, but it can also be a medium for realizing certain conceptions of a good, meaningful life. The absolutist state that materialized the Hobbesian Leviathan not only created the temporal foundations for the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie but also eliminated the violent lifestyle of the former ruling class that had handed over or lost its political power, namely the old warrior aristocracy. The inner pacification of the modern state constituted a new temporal regime, opening new horizons of plannability and economic enterprise for an upcoming new elite. The laboring population, previously passive objects in the temporality marked by war, now finds quantities of time set free, formerly consumed by the actions of the nobility of the sword. This nobility, enjoying the luxury of not needing to work to subsist, was especially blessed with temporal luxury. Yet boredom became a dominant affective experience for its members. Exempted from the duty to work, the aristocracy, unlike the working bourgeoisie, lacked the means to fill the newly won time with meaningful activity. Not everyone is equally capable of handling the necessity to fill it with self-designed actions and projects, for which one must take full responsibility.

Therefore, according to Wolf Lepenies, the modern age experienced one of its first great crises of political boredom during the *Fronde*, the uprisings challenging the rule of Louis XIV that shook France between 1648 and 1653. These events, as Lepenies argues, were less a political act with a concrete goal and more a confused attempt to escape the leisure forced upon the aristocrats, which had become unbearable.³² In the *Fronde*, boredom appeared as a political factor, unleashing considerable destructive energies. Simultaneously, it was an attempt to reinstall a catalog of heroic values that had been disconnected from the lives of society members; it was the reclaiming of a mode of life that, in order to enable the numerous possibilities offered by the new social and political order, had been excluded.

²⁹ Cf. Marx and Engels, *Die deutsche Ideologie*, 33.

³⁰ Engels, "Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus," 224.

³¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 185.

³² Lepenies, *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, 43–75.

The constituted space of political action requires, to be maintained, a certain restraint regarding the forms of life that can be pursued. For the defeated aristocrats, this meant giving up their rebellion against the boredom to which they were condemned and accepting it as normality. It also demanded that subjects live with a certain lack of meaning, a nonchalance in view of the emptiness experienced in boredom. As Lepenies describes, a whole cultural system of communication, diversion, and literary production arose from this necessity in the seventeenth century. This system was essentially an attempt to live with a permanently sensed lack of meaning. A crisis of political boredom occurs when dissatisfaction with the accepted form of life leads to the assumption that something exciting, sublime, and immensely meaningful lies beyond the imposed boundaries. These boundaries concern both violence as a means of politics and the political ends or *projects of meaning* that the violent means are supposed to serve. Rather than pursuing clear, well-defined goals, one's vague attraction to the repressed, excluded *other life* to be reconquered is the driving motive. The politics of boredom are essentially adventurism, regressing into a temporal mode that the liberal temporal dispositive is supposed to overcome.

Hobbes, like most theoreticians and utopians of lasting pacification, would never have suspected that the disappeared enmity could become an object of nostalgia. The enemy, who is no longer there, has left a void that cannot be filled. The (proto)liberal thinkers who reflected on the liberation that a new political world without deadly enmities would bring never imagined that a *horror vacui* could be a reaction to the newfound liberty. When Carl Schmitt claims in his famous *The Concept of the Political*³³ that authentic selfness can only be reached in politics, whereas politics essentially is self-assertion in view of the threatening enemy, this implies a *nostalgia of enmity*, – nostalgia for a past where preoccupation with the threat from the enemy was a primary content of time. The bored thymotic spirit, after trying all the surrogates society offers, senses detachment from the “innocent pleasures”³⁴ that are available and, blocked in the desire to make the world one's own, deliberately seeks the danger emanating from the enemy as a form of “negative resonance” of its own being.

If there is no enemy at hand – if there were, boredom would already have been interrupted – one has to be created. In a famous passage from the *Pensées*, we become witnesses to such a creation. Blaise Pascal reflects on the misery that comes upon humans due to their restlessness and need for diversion – their inability to sit quietly in their room. Pascal, writing against the background of established absolutism, draws the picture of a king who, finding himself in a peaceful situation, free from any pressures of the natural or social world, begins to imagine possible threats simply out of boredom, leading him to start wars with whoever is the suspected perpetrator of the menace.³⁵ The process of “free-floating attention” that Adam Phillips describes as inherent to the state of boredom leads to the imagination of dangers that, once the subject resorts to fighting them, lead to real endangerment. One can duly say that the processes of radicalization and the surge of conspiratorial thinking during the COVID-19 crisis³⁶ very much match the scenario Pascal depicts.

Quite similarly, and equally applicable to political phenomena of the present, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche speaks of the tendency to inflate minor reasons for conflict to deliberately escalate tensions and provoke violent fighting. The politics of boredom have a histrionic tendency – it is looking for the big drama, using available opportunities to create one, only to interrupt the unbearable eventlessness. In light of Nietzsche's vitalist philosophy, this tendency, especially present among the youth, appears positively, contrary to Pascal's moral and theological assessment of boredom and its political effects. The passage from Nietzsche's work deserves to be cited in extenso:

The desire for suffering. – When I think of the desire to do something, how it continually tickles and goads the millions of young Europeans who cannot endure boredom and themselves, I realize that they must have a yearning to suffer something in order to make their suffering a likely reason for action, for deeds. Neediness is needed! Hence the clamour of the politicians; hence

³³ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*.

³⁴ Lepenies, *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, 61. Transl. A. D. Lepenies cites here a letter from the Duchesse of Longueville to La Rochefoucauld.

³⁵ Pascal, *Pensées*, 118–24.

³⁶ Cf. Brosowsky, “Boredom Proneness.”

the many false, fictitious, exaggerated ‘emergencies’ of all kinds and the blind readiness to believe in them. This young world demands that not happiness, but unhappiness should approach or become visible from outside; and its imagination is already busy turning this unhappiness into a monster ahead of time so that afterwards it can fight a monster. Were these distress-addicts to feel within themselves the power to do themselves good from within, to do something for themselves, they would know how to create their very own distress. Their inventions could then become more refined and their satisfactions sound like good music, while they now fill the world with their clamour about distress, and consequently, all too often with the feeling of distress! They do not know what to do with themselves – and so they paint the unhappiness of others on the wall; they always need others! And continually other others! – Pardon me, my friends, I have ventured to paint my happiness on the wall.³⁷

Both Pascal and Nietzsche characterize the imaginative work of political boredom: the bored spirit tends to invent dangers or exaggerate existing evils to captivating content and a task. One may speak of a negative absorption by the threat and the enemy that replaces positive absorption by activities related to personal growth rather than mere self-preservation.

In his 1991 monograph, Fukuyama elaborates on the notion of a future restart of history after the triumph of liberal democracy, which he famously diagnosed. This future restart, he suspects, might be driven by boredom. The possible future menace to liberal democracy that Fukuyama envisages is very close to Lepenies’ depiction of the warrior aristocracy’s rebellion against the absolutist appeasement of society. It is one’s reclaiming of fighting as a way of life and the aristocratic values of prestige and superiority that the liberal order has to fear.

Thymos is the side of man that deliberately seeks out struggle and sacrifice, that tries to prove that the self is something better and higher than a fearful, needy, instinctual, physically determined animal. Not all men feel this pull, but for those who do, *thymos* cannot be satisfied by the knowledge that they are merely equal in worth to all other human beings.³⁸

According to Fukuyama, liberal democracy is based on reciprocal *isothymic* recognition of the other as equal, which manifests itself in legal equality that, though not guaranteeing material equality, sets limits to relations of dominance and dependence between individuals. *Megalothymia*, on the other hand, is the desire to see one’s superiority recognized.³⁹ Liberal societies are far from being isothymic utopias, permitting a considerable degree of inequality and the contest for status and prestige to unfold. In Lepenies’ description of the aftermath of the *Fronde*, the court culture of Louis XIV and the culture of the salons covertly contain a thymotic element. The perfect mastery of manners and intellectual brilliance shown in benign conversation becomes a means to distinguish oneself from others, thus being, in what could be called a “ruse of civilization,” an unbloody means of a fight for prestige.⁴⁰ Similarly, Alexandre Kojève, who partly lived in Japan during his exile in WWII, claimed that Japan’s astonishing shift from an almost 100-year-long period of continuous conflict between rival warlords (the *Sengoku period*) to an exceptionally long period of peace under the Tokugawa shogunate (the *Edo period*) was due to the code of manners elaborated and reinforced at that time. The perfect mastery of the rules of politeness really was a means of snobbish distinction.⁴¹

Nevertheless, more than these cultural systems originating in the seventeenth century, twentieth-century capitalist society has far more possibilities for acting out megalothymic urges. The primary field for such activity would be the economy, where their energy can be put to good use. In a remark that echoes a similar observation made by Max Weber in the early twentieth century, Fukuyama states that it is “the very design of democratic capitalist countries like the United States that the most talented and ambitious natures should tend to go into business rather than into politics” and stay there. There, they would put their energy and talents to good use, possibly profitable for the entire society, whereas in politics and the military, “their restlessness would lead them to cause upheavals at home and adventures abroad, with potentially disastrous

³⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book I, Aphorism 56, 79.

³⁸ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Men*, 304.

³⁹ Fukuyama, *Identity*.

⁴⁰ Lepenies, *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, 52–64.

⁴¹ Scholz, “Eine Fußnote zu Japan,” 57f.

consequences for the polity.”⁴² Populist political entrepreneurs with a business background, such as Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, or Nigel Farage, embody precisely this type of career jumper that Fukuyama warned against in the early 1990s. Thus, according to Fukuyama, the future of liberal democracy depends on liberal societies’ ability to develop “regular and constructive outlets for *megalothymia*.”⁴³

It follows from his arguments that there is a tendency inherent to megalothymia to ever expand the scope of the struggle, both in its extension and intensity. It pushes the struggle to the point where the combatants risk paying the ultimate price – their own lives. For this inclination, liberal societies also have to find a surrogate. Fukuyama gives the example of “Alpine mountain climbing,” an activity that enjoys great popularity in “prosperous post-historical countries” and in which, according to the author, “the conditions of historical struggle” are recreated: “danger, disease, hard work, and finally the risk of violent death.” Here, the “object has ceased to be a historical one and now is purely formal: for example, being the first American or German to ascend K-2 or Nanga Parbat.”⁴⁴ In a way, these are “moral equivalents” of martial actions and virtues in a Jamesian sense.⁴⁵ However, the functioning of such substitutes could be temporarily limited, especially if, after a long period of peace and stability and with the fading of the historical memory of war, dictatorial rule, and other forms of political violence, the original consciousness of the value of peace and order fades away. Liberal democracies have to counteract this through institutionalized memory – “the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.”⁴⁶ Political boredom and megalothymia capitalize on the fact that the value of peace seems, in the sense of a figure-ground structure, to be only adequately perceptible as long as the horrors of war are *co-evident*. In a situation of progressive collective amnesia, which is the natural result of the passing of time. The megalothymic contempt for liberal democratic emphasis not merely on equality but also on non-violence and the prevention of suffering can become an element of mass ideologies rather than ideas shared only by an elite minority.

5 Boredom after History

In his 1991 book, Fukuyama does not clearly distinguish between the thymos of the medieval and early modern warrior aristocracy that fought for prestige, which is a good that is egoistically enjoyed and not legitimized by any higher ideal, and a thymos that has gone through the school of the French Revolution and modern political ideologies, beginning with nationalism. The latter is not primarily striving for the recognition of personal superiority; rather than prestige or superiority, the concept of *sacrifice* is crucial to understanding this sort of thymotic attitude. Here, the fight is not about the recognition of one’s power and strength as an end in itself but rather instrumental in relation to a collectively shared good or an ideal from which collective struggles and sacrifices derive their value and meaning. Resorting to notions stemming from German Idealism,⁴⁷ Fukuyama explains that for these kinds of fighters, the superiority that is aspired to, rather than meaning dominance over other persons, is an abstract moral superiority over the lesser, creaturely nature in themselves, manifesting itself in the acceptance of pain and death. This is “the only way they have of proving definitively that they *can think well of themselves*, that they remain *human beings*.”⁴⁸ However, this moral attitude is that of the idealized modern citizen-soldier or the revolutionary who derives his self-worth, his sense of pride, and his honor from the fulfillment of his duties, which he owes to his nation or his class, duties that include his readiness to endanger his life. In fighting for a nation or an idea, the individual participates, or rather exists, in the temporal sphere of *history* that might thwart individual temporality, make carefully made plans for the future

⁴² Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 316. See Weber, “Politik als Beruf,” 541f.

⁴³ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 328.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁴⁵ James, “The Moral Equivalent of War.”

⁴⁶ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 337.

⁴⁷ Siep and Olivier, “Vom mystischen Körper zur Erfahrungsgeschichte.”

⁴⁸ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 329.

obsolete, annihilate expectations and hopes, and yet not merely destroy meaning that has guided lives but at the same time elevate them to a higher level of meaning. In this perspective, the consumption of time and lives by war is not merely bearable; it is even desirable because war is, unlike Hobbes, not merely a struggle for lower, “egoistic” goods such as material gains, prestige, or safety, but for ideals. It enables one to live *in history*, which is the ultimate source of meaning in this system of thought.

In a piece for *The National Interest* in 1989, which later evolved into the well-known monograph, Fukuyama highlights this moral elevation through one’s participation in historical struggles. In this very first statement on the triumph of Western democracy, the phantom of boredom prevents the statement of this result of world history from being propounded with enthusiasm or even optimism:

The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel in myself, and see in others around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed. Such nostalgia, in fact, will continue to fuel competition and conflict even in the post-historical world for some time to come. Even though I recognize its inevitability, I have the most ambivalent feelings for the civilization that has been created in Europe since 1945, with its north Atlantic and Asian offshoots. Perhaps this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again.⁴⁹

It is interesting to note here that Fukuyama, very much in line with a certain conservative, romantic strand in the philosophical interpretation of war,⁵⁰ reverses Hobbes’ judgment that war and human culture and civilization are irreconcilable. True culture here seems to be interrelated with the great struggles on the stage of history. After this struggle comes to an end, art loses its relevance. Moreover, it might still work hard to produce constant innovations, but the sophisticated observer knows that this forced movement does nothing more than satisfy the trivial demand for something new that prevents the emergence of boredom. People might still be busy with politics, but its course will be entirely dictated by the profane needs of individuals arising from their social and economic (inter)actions. History, as something genuinely written by politics and states that use the lives and time of individuals for sublime ends, disappears, or rather unravels, into autonomized temporalities. Political temporality is reactive and secondary in relation to societal developments. Politics seeks to reconcile conflicting societal demands: the individual’s demands for self-realization, the demands of the economy, and, as Fukuyama has already foreseen, the demands of the environment. Doing politics no longer means participating in great projects of meaning or stories that would elevate one’s existence. Since there is no belief or trust in such great projects, conflicts end in compromises because the subject’s dedication to the struggles is limited. For the nostalgic mind, the new content and face of politics inevitably appear trivial and undignified compared to the past.⁵¹

The end of history, which for Fukuyama is synonymous with the end of the great historical struggles between the political ideologies of modernity, is itself the result of (megalothymotic) struggle. The system of liberal democracy has turned out to be, in light of the often catastrophic results of one-sided excesses, the political order that manages to satisfy the conflicting demands for recognition by a compromise between the reign of isothymia in the legal and political sphere and the admission of a certain space for megalothymia in the economy, arguably also in culture. It is yet not comprehensible why all political struggles should end with the great struggle of systems and ideologies. In one passage of his book, Fukuyama, following Kojève, rambles on the Nietzschean notion of the *Last Man*, who, living in a society that is perfectly arranged and henceforth does not exhibit a social and political evil such as injustice anymore, would morally degrade to the state of an

⁴⁹ Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” 18. For the debate on Fukuyama’s famous analysis that produced a flood of literature, e.g., Meyer, *Ende der Geschichte?*; Demandt, *Endzeit*; Niethammer, *Posthistoire*; Esposito, “Posthistoire;” Sloterdijk, “Nach der Geschichte.”

⁵⁰ Cf. Ullmann, “Krieg als Befreiung der Kultur;” Caillois, *Bellone ou la pente de la guerre*, 189–200.

⁵¹ There is an echo of this nostalgia when the autonomy of the political in relation to the affairs of “society” is defended, such as in the case of Hannah Arendt; cf. Arendt, *Was ist Politik?*, 28–80.

animal since there would be no higher goods than their own well-being and enjoyment to live for. “Human life,” as our author argues, “involves a curious paradox: it seems to require injustice, for the struggle against injustice is what calls forth what is highest in man.”⁵²

Now, it is obvious that in the rather short period where liberal democracy was fairly uncontested from the outside, struggles for recognition and justice never ceased on the inside and might even have intensified, as Fukuyama later argues in *Identity*. People dedicate considerable time and energy to engaging in these struggles. Political activism is, for some, a form of life that, if one considers, for example, the audacious activities of some Greenpeace activists, can be dangerous too. It is eminently questionable to consider only the sacrifice of one’s own life when judging the moral level of people and deciding whether they still live the lives of men or already live as animals.⁵³ For those standing in these struggles, there are still futures left to be conquered or *opened*⁵⁴ and emancipatory political victories to be won. Liberal (popular) culture, which itself works as a means in the fight for recognition, makes the general public familiar with these (hi)stories. “Historical existence,” if it means participation in the temporal unfolding of ideals such as justice, as Fukuyama suggests, is still possible, but primarily only for members of particular groups who are heroes in an ongoing story of emancipation: women and minorities such as migrants or persons from the LGBTQIA spectrum. Political temporality is particularized; it goes on while excluding a great part of society as mere bystanders, maybe sympathizers, and supporters, but not *heroes*.

Inside the sphere of liberal democracy, there is a rift between those who are empowered by the framework of liberal democracy to claim their “own history” and those who remain bystanders or, worse, experience the “loss” of their histories, identities, and status, insofar as the dark, repressive, violent side of their past is progressively revealed by the uprising and emancipatory movements. It is precisely the privileged who live “ahistorically,” from which can arise, despite economic security, a precarity of meaning: the lack of a story that is interesting for oneself and for others and dignified by a sort of existential *methexis* (participation) in the realm of ideals and values, the sense thus of an empty time, and the fear that one is boring oneself in the eyes of others.

Groups like middle-class white men and probably whole nations struggle with this predicament. Whereas in the inner realm, those who are marginalized and disadvantaged but at least have a (his)story of *emancipation* to tell are observed with resentment by those who are privileged but live boringly *storyless* from a political perspective, the globalized liberal world that was expected to come offered nothing but the much less attractive story of *imitation* to the nations on its margins: the imitation of the Western civilizational model, which, due to the historically accumulated backlog, is very likely only to be a second- or third-rate imitation. The yearning for historical existence, as shall be suggested here, is a stronger motive for political action than the liberal mind commonly assumes. While the participation of a large number of well-off members of the middle class has been an irritating fact for those who tried to explain an event like the storming of the Capitol in early 2021 by the supposed social disadvantages of those involved, boredom has been explicitly named as a motive for their actions by convicted participants.⁵⁵ Vladimir Putin’s politics of weaponized nostalgia might agree with such high approval, especially in the part of the Russian population that was socialized in the Soviet regime, because of the unattractiveness of being, as a nation, a third-class economic and political player in a liberal world order whose glorious past gets picked apart by such typical offspring of a Westernized civil society as *Memorial*.⁵⁶ It would be the existence on the margins of the global attention economy, without a future to be carved out, but only one to copy, and no story that one could be proud to narrate. It is by groups and whole peoples at the margins of intra-liberal historicity that history with a big “H” would be restarted.

⁵² Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 311.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ On the notion of the opening of the future(s) as the essence of democratic temporality, refer to Barbehön, “Die Realität der Zeit und die Ereignishaftigkeit der Demokratie.”

⁵⁵ Pape and Ruby, “The Capitol Rioters Aren’t Like Other Extremists.”

⁵⁶ Werth, *Putin, historien en chef*. The theory that Putin acted out of boredom in early 2021 has been proposed by the renowned historian Alexander Etkind; Medvedev and Etkind, “He Was Bored.” Cf. also Etkind, *Russia Against Modernity*, 102.

6 The Philosopher's Yearning for History

There is another group that can be added to the list: philosophers. It is well known that the problem of philosophy's and the philosopher's fate after the end of history, in view of a future from which, as Arnold Gehlen has put it, there is nothing to expect in terms of the history of ideas,⁵⁷ has been around for more than two hundred years, namely since it was first posed or rather created by Hegel.⁵⁸ In fact, in Hegel's writings, the question of how a meaningful philosophical existence is possible after the owl of Minerva has made her flight is ignored with nonchalance. There are, though, private statements that reveal that the philosopher's attitude toward the future was rather melancholic. In a letter reported by his biographer Rosenkranz, Hegel writes to his Russian disciple and friend Boris Uxkull in November 1821 that the latter ought to regard himself as a happy man since his fatherland occupies such a great place in history and will, without any doubt for the German philosopher, occupy an even greater place in the future. Whereas the development of numerous modern European states has already passed its point of culmination and turned into static reproduction, Russia still has, according to Hegel in the early 1820s, enormous potentials of its intense nature that yet have to be developed.⁵⁹ There are still historical experiences to live through. However, Hegel never regarded the futures of the great "developing states" of his time, Russia and the USA, as anything different than variations of European history;⁶⁰ they would finally lead to the installation of the European state model, which combines a strong authority of the state with civic liberties and republican elements.

The essential meaning of this development, therefore, has already been spelled out in his philosophy; it is only the memory of one's own youth that is projected on the other, but it is not the expectation of something substantially new and different. There is a melancholy of old age in Hegel's words, accompanied by the assumption that everything of importance has already been said, and the only meaningful, practical task is to reiterate and expand what has proved to be reasonable – a perspective embodied by Hegel's interpreter Alexandre Kojève who left the business of professional philosophy in order to become a secretary of the OEEC and work as a functionary of the liberal world order. There certainly is no such thing as a philosophical or political rebellion against the boredom of the static present.

It is of interest here that, in his youth, Hegel explicitly linked his own philosophy to a crisis of boredom. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1807,

It is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward. ... The Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms. The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change. The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world.⁶¹

These words, in contrast to Hegel's aforementioned quote, are written in the midst of a present that is in movement and speak of the spirit as being in formation. However, it is the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly in the parts of absolute knowledge, that is designed to be the conclusion of this process of formation. Boredom is not the driving motive of the philosopher; boredom and frivolity – *Leichtsinn*, which means an activity exerted without responsibility – are manifestations of a state of *anomie* in the sense of Durkheim,⁶² in which the norms and legitimatory ideas of the old order crumble, and a new configuration of the objective spirit emerges through the events of the French Revolution and Napoleon. Moreover, they are helpful forces of

⁵⁷ Gehlen, "Über kulturelle Kristallisation," 322.

⁵⁸ On the notion of the end of history in Hegel, cf. Gloy, "Hegel und das Ende der Geschichte;" Dale, *Hegel, the End of History, and the Future*.

⁵⁹ Rosenkranz, *Hegels Leben*, 304f.

⁶⁰ Henningsen, "Das Amerika von Hegel, Marx und Engels," 229–37.

⁶¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 6f.

⁶² Durkheim, *Suicide*, 241.

historical progress, but they are not guided by philosophy – at least not by true philosophy, meaning Hegel's philosophy. Boredom might be an object of philosophy, but true philosophy, for Hegel, can never be associated with *Leichtsinn*.

Historical existence, for Hegel, Kojève, and Fukuyama, is not an end in itself, and boredom, as well as a certain trivialization of philosophy, are the prices that have to be paid if one does not fall for one of the illusions that have already been outlived by history. As stated above, philosophy plays its part in reproducing the liberal temporal dispositive. After the great struggles of ideas have been decided, not so much by the triumphal deeds of the winner but by the fiasco that the great promises of the losers have suffered, and the solid functioning of societal relations in liberalism has prevailed over the dysfunctional social organization in communism and other dictatorial, sometimes totalitarian systems, all that is left for philosophy to do is guard the memory and the teachings of the past and at best provide good normative arguments for those groups who still have to struggle for full recognition within the liberal democratic order.

However, what if, precisely, *Leichtsinn* becomes the driving motive of philosophy? As such, it would be driven by discontent with the existing order, yet not out of reasons that could be articulated as legitimate causes for discontent within the moral framework that underlies the political order. Therefore, it is for trifling reasons such as boredom that the order is contested. This cannot go without a depreciation of the historically gained wisdom that explicates the value of the existing order. The first philosopher to defend such a stance toward the teachings of history was Nietzsche, who, in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, demands a deliberately selective dealing with history in order to break out from the detachment and feebleness that result from an all-too-good knowledge of history's dark sides, of its catastrophes and sufferings, and give life again to what he calls *vital illusions*, without which, according to Nietzsche, humans don't dare to make history.⁶³ Obviously, these illusions will, in future catastrophes, reveal themselves as such, which, in Nietzsche's circular and tragic worldview, is no argument against them.

For the sake of historical existence, the teachings of history have to be forgotten. Out of a desire to gain back an existential possibility from which one was cut off, *philo-sophia* turns into *anti-sophia*. The most important philosophical elaboration of this attitude toward history can be found in Heidegger. Here, philosophy is the work of *deep boredom*, and the outlived illusions appear as promises and possibilities of a meaningful, rich existence that, even if they turned out to be overwhelming, one should dare to take up again. The course, therefore, is set anew, not by new insights into the labor of history, as Marx tried to refute Hegel's claim that the bourgeois state would provide a lasting solution to the problem of recognition, but by a new resoluteness in pursuit of that which has been dropped – a resoluteness that should be fed by philosophy.

Deep boredom, as Heidegger writes, contains the sentiment that the authentic possibilities of *Dasein* are unexploited (*brachliegen*),⁶⁴ one is detached from the totality of beings that "refuses" itself (*sich versagen*),⁶⁵ yet it is also only in deep boredom that the moment (*Augenblick*) of authentic existence and one's ownmost possibility can be grasped. Heidegger's terminology reveals that the counterpart to boredom, as an *Augenblick*, is ephemeral in contrast to boredom as a continuity and that it is characterized by a passivity of the subject in what Heidegger calls "essential oppressiveness" (*wesenhafte Bedrängnis*).⁶⁶ Boredom, as discussed above, is essentially a blockage of an active attitude of the subject toward the world and a crisis of an individual's temporal autonomy. The autonomous subject takes care to fill the time at its disposal with meaningful actions and events, and it is itself responsible for its success in doing so. However, in boredom, there are no meaningful goals at hand; what has appeared attractive and desirable before has ceased to do so, and therefore, the subject is hindered in its striving to care for its time. The salvation of the subject comes from "outside," in the mode of a *Kairos*, a term fashionable in Weimar Germany in the late 1920s, meaning an

⁶³ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, esp. 58–64. On Nietzsche and the End of History, cf. Csejtei and Juhász, "Nietzsches geschichtsphilosophische Perspektive nach dem Ende der Geschichte."

⁶⁴ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 142.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

ephemeral window of opportunity in which extraordinary possibilities are available and at the same time a demand to take action directed at the individual by history itself.⁶⁷

The “essential distress” remains utterly abstract and vague in the lecture of 1929/30, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, and Heidegger is reluctant to frame it in terms of history. However, the historical dimension of this *Bedrängnis* can be extrapolated from his earlier writings, namely *Being and Time* from 1927 and his inaugural speech as the rector of the University of Freiburg from the first year of the Nazi regime. In the second part of *Sein und Zeit*, in his reflection on Dasein’s essential possibilities, with death being the ultimate possibility, Heidegger is led to history as part of the thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) of Dasein, its passive ontological constitution as a being that has no sovereignty over the conditions of its existence. Being existentially “thrown” into a particular social community or “being together” (*Mitsein*), which itself has a temporal existence, the temporality of the individual subject is ontologically grounded in the temporality of the community, the *Volk* (nation). It is through this socio-ontological participation and dependency that Dasein has a historical dimension.⁶⁸ Yet this is not merely stated descriptively as a fact but has normative implications. Since Dasein is rooted in the history of a *Volk*, it also has an obligation (*Schuld*)⁶⁹ toward the community. Furthermore, since it is rooted in a concrete sphere of *Mitsein*, its ownmost, authentic existential possibility is not detachable from the latter; it is inherited from it, and the seizing of these possibilities by the individual has the structure of a “repetition”⁷⁰ of something already established.

Nevertheless, Heidegger exceeds mere communitarian existentialism once he develops that the history of one’s *Volk*, its “fate” (*Geschick*),⁷¹ is very much identical to one’s authentic possibility. The treatment of death is of key importance here. Through the “resolute running ahead to death” (*entschlossenes Vorlaufen in den Tod*), which takes place in the reflection on Dasein’s individual temporality, Dasein has become “free for death” and is ready to “take over the powerlessness” of its existential “abandonment” to the conditions into which it is thrown, including the fate of the *Volk* in which it takes part. Dasein, which in its non-authentic state was busily preoccupied with maintaining the course of its life and thus being the sovereign of its own temporality, is now willing to abandon this striving and give itself to something that passes over the individuals’ heads, in defiance of their plans and endeavors.

This temporal overpowering of the individual by history also relieves the individuals of their autonomy and the associated pressures; the individuals are no longer obliged to master their life. Its responsibility is reduced to the duties imposed by the community and history. Autonomy is limited to the question of taking up one’s duties in relation to the fate of the *Volk*. Paradoxically, Dasein is both passively thrown into this fate and must choose to take up its part in this fate, which is identical to the actualization of its ownmost possibility. Authenticity qua taking part in the fate of the *Volk* is “that which is properly binding” (*das eigentlich Verbindliche*).⁷² The resolute acceptance of death as the ultimate possibility is now a precondition for existence in history as an authentic possibility because history is not a safe place but is essentially “struggle” or fighting (*Kampf*).⁷³

Inheritance as repetition and struggle seem inseparably interconnected for Heidegger; strikingly, the act of inheriting is described in martial terms as a “struggle of loyally following in the footsteps of that which can be repeated.”⁷⁴ If one looks at Heidegger’s later engagement with National Socialism, the idea suggests that the struggle is precisely the essential inheritance that should be repeated, taken up again after the interruption caused by the end of the Great War, the Versailles Peace Treaty, and the brief period of liberal pacifism in

67 Christophersen, *Kairos*; Tillich, “Kairos.”

68 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 434f.

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*, 437.

71 *Ibid.*, 435.

72 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 165.

73 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 436.

74 *Ibid.*, 437.

Weimar, Germany.⁷⁵ Accordingly, Heidegger's 1933 inaugural address is full of martial rhetoric and pathos of deliberately sought-out danger. The *kairotic* moment, for Heidegger, seems to have arrived by then. Science, for Heidegger, is a "questioning, unguarded holding of one's ground in the midst of the uncertainty of the totality of what-is" and a "will to essence," which "will create for our people its world, our world of innermost and most extreme danger, i.e., its truly spiritual world."⁷⁶

Science and philosophy will lead people into danger, reclaiming their historical existence that has been cut away by the present and that is inherently a struggle. Because this choice involves great risks, people will have to learn from philosophy to withstand everything that might cause doubt and lead to the waning of resoluteness. Since it is unknown what the content of this future will be, and since one will live again in the temporality of fate and not that of sovereign planning, the doubts will be all the more pressing. The future is entirely undefined; it does not concretize into any nameable goal. However, it is clear that it is one's *own* future, deriving from the repetition of the past, and by being this, it is also *essential* and justified from an existential perspective – an underlying equation that reveals the identitarian core of Heidegger's existential philosophy. Boredom, then, is the drive that would lead subjects to take upon themselves the way from the secured present to the dangers of historical existence. Here, we find the frivolity of which Hegel spoke, a frivolity that results from the fading away of the clear consciousness of the risks and dangers one provokes. The talk of danger here is little more than the dramatic rhetoric of heroism.

Hegel would have agreed with Heidegger that every horizon of possible action is determined by the past and that therefore historical action has, in a way, the structure of repetition. Nevertheless, the future is not meaningful merely because one's own past is taken up and asserted against the pressure that the world sets against oneself, and the taking up of the past is not legitimated solely because it is one's own past. The future is meaningful when the problems posed by the past are solved. For Hegel, Kojève, and Fukuyama, history is judged in light of the problem of social organization, which, in modernity, is determined by the contradictions inherent in bourgeois society. Since Europe, through colonization, has affected – or, one could say, infected – the world with these contradictions, the solutions found in European history are, according to these theorists, of global validity. In the Cold War and the epoch of the great concurrence of systems, which was also a contest over the question of who brought the liberal temporal dispositive to perfection, both ideological projects were firmly rooted in the linear temporal matrix of progress.

As Kojève has put it, once the modern European state has been identified as the definitive solution to this problem, both the work of philosophy and history are over.⁷⁷ Since philosophy has nothing more to do than repeat this truth, it becomes the most boring of all activities. The Heideggerian politics of repetition is not interested in taking a standpoint from which the different contributions to solving the problem are judged according to universal criteria, including one's own contribution. There is simply no such thing as a problem that should be solved. Heideggerian politics adds to the implosion⁷⁸ of the universalist temporal matrix that has been called "history."⁷⁹ The meaning of the future is not the transcending of the limits of a common present and a common past, but the assertion of a particular past that the world attempts to negate – the assertion of identity. The aggressive, fighting act of taking up the past does not have to be justified to anyone who is not part of the Volk. Since history is no longer the sphere of universally shared problems to which universally applicable solutions must be found but the picking up and living through one's very own destiny, the meaning of one's own actions can no longer be legitimated with universally acceptable reasons but can only be seized by members of one's own struggling community. The goal of history after the liberal end of history consists in striking one's own solid identity out of the past and the future.

⁷⁵ On the influence of WWI on the thought of Heidegger, Losurdo, *Die Gemeinschaft, der Tod, das Abendland*. In 1929/30, Heidegger speaks of a "sealing off" of the past and a "binding" of the future (*Abriegelung der Vergangenheit und Abbindung der Zukunft*) in the present; Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 125. (The translation by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker is incorrect in translating "abgebunden" with "unbound.") On Heidegger and the End of History cf. Sloterdijk, "Heideggers Politik."

⁷⁶ Heidegger et al., "The Self-Assertion of the German University," 474.

⁷⁷ Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 272–92.

⁷⁸ Marder, "The Implosion of History."

⁷⁹ Koselleck, "'Erfahrungsraum' und 'Erwartungshorizont'."

In not being willing or not being able to contribute to solving common problems, this politics, in a way, validates the “thesis” of the end of history in the sense that if history moves on, it cannot be pushed any further along the vector of progress but only leads to collapse in order to create a space where things have a place again that were considered outlived before. Heidegger wanted to take up history again where it was, according to the *völkisch* intellectuals, forcibly left by the Germans, namely, in the defeat in WWI. One could say that today, in a politics so heavily drawing upon historical legitimation such as Vladimir Putin’s, whose views on the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union are well known, a Heideggerian politics is put into practice – a politics driven by the will to *live in history*. However, a broader and, at the same time, more eclectic approach seems to take place here. Putin has identified himself with the Czars Peter the Great and Alexander III,⁸⁰ but also, in his notorious essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* from July 2021 and his speech at the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 21, 2022, suggested a historical depth of the conflict reaching as far back as the founding of the Kievan Rus. These historical references are meant to bring out beyond any doubt that great history and politics are happening again, and by legitimizing the initiation of a great but enormously risky historical event in turn with references to other historical events, they reinstall what one could call *pure* political temporality. The event as the product of political action is entirely legitimized by it being a historical event; it is not a meaning derived from the benefits that can be expected for the lives of individuals, but on the contrary, the lives of the individuals are legitimized by their partaking in and being consumed by the event.⁸¹

Putin’s reasons for starting the current war in Ukraine are still obscure for Western observers since they are so far from the frameworks of legitimation that determine the “logic” of liberal politics. Since economic explanations are hardly plausible,⁸² many commentators resort to power-strategic reasons Putin might have had to further consolidate his power.⁸³ The author is not able to competently judge such analyses. Instead, he only wants to remind that in such explanations, which are, in the end, reductions to one’s own framework of rationally understandable reasons, the astonishing fact that Putin could hope – and was right to do so, as polls show the solid support he enjoys among the Russian population suggest⁸⁴ – to deliver the public an acceptable justification for starting a major war by referencing the history of the Kievan Rus is overlooked. Something that would be simply outlandish and “crazy” in the liberal context *works* in the Russian context, revealing a substantial shift in the moral and ideological reasons a society accepts as justification for political action.

Putin and the ideologues in his service, including the Heideggerian Alexander Dugin,⁸⁵ have delivered and continue to deliver something that could be called “absolute ideology” as a justification for the war – absolute in the sense that it shows no comprehensible ties to the interests of societal groups (other than the elite clique of its promoters) but rather demonstrates the nearly total independence of the state’s acts with regard to the latter. The past here, as also the memory politics concerning the Great Patriotic War, another key historical template of Putin,⁸⁶ shows, is not merely a reservoir from which monumental templates are taken in a mode of appropriation as proposed by Nietzsche. It also displays what Hans Blumenberg called “prefigurative” thinking – the idea that the question of the legitimation of acts can be settled solely by referencing a mythological or historical paragon that is regarded as indisputably meaningful.⁸⁷ Putin, by walking in the footsteps of Peter or Alexander III, moves on the path of one’s own Russian history, and that is sufficient as a justification.

⁸⁰ Troianovski, “Putin the Great?”; Torbakov, “The Royal Role Model.”

⁸¹ One can interpret in this sense Putin’s words to the mother of a fallen soldier: “Some die and it’s not even noticeable ... But your son lived. His goal has been achieved. In this sense, of course, his life turned out to be significant, with a result.” Ilyushina, “Putin tells mothers of soldiers fighting in Ukraine he ‘shares’ their pain.”

⁸² Lawrence, “Russia’s War in Ukraine.”

⁸³ Ferraro, “Why Russia Invaded Ukraine.”

⁸⁴ NORC, “Russian Public Opinion in Wartime.” Of course, doubts can be raised about the validity of polling in current Russia; cf. Caryl, “What Do Russians Really Think About Putin’s War?”

⁸⁵ Dugin has written a voluminous monograph on Heidegger: Dugin, *Martin Heidegger*.

⁸⁶ Ackerman, *Le Régiment immortel*.

⁸⁷ Blumenberg, *Präfiguration*, 14f.

Likewise, in the heart of the West, the Capitol rioters used codewords such as “1776 Returns” and “The Winter Palace” in their communications during the prelude to the attack on January 6, 2021. Even the American and French Revolutionaries themselves heavily cited the anti-monarchic Roman Republic as a template for their own political projects. One can understand such references as declarations of one’s aspirations and of the level of monumental historical significance one wants to reach. They reveal the consciousness of a change in the temporal register; the sleeping god of history shall be awakened, history and politics should become again the sphere of the presence of the sublime and the sacred, which, according to Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, modern societies dangerously tend to seek in the realm of politics after religion and the festival (*fête*) have ceased to be the media through which the presence of a higher, sacred realm, is achieved.⁸⁸

7 Conclusion: Living with Boredom

Humans cannot live entirely in profane temporality, as Bataille and Caillois have suggested. They from time to time grow desperate in their arduous attempts to keep their lives on a good course and glowing with meaningfulness, to steadily find goals that give satisfying content to the time they spend on earth. Then, they feel the urge to sacrifice for what they worked hard for, for they willfully destroy and waste it to affirm and feel, in this symbolic negation of their petty worries, fears, and strivings, the presence of something *sacred*. Raging boredom, as it shall be proposed here, is the attempt to reach these ecstatic heights, and modern politics has exploited this desire, proposing violent action, wars, and revolutions as a functional equivalent of the festival and the practice of sacrifice in traditional societies.

It might be that profane time in the center of the liberal-capitalist world and its circulation of the products of labor, which it has liberated in the sense of Hobbes, including the central good of *novelty*, is something much easier to bear than at its margins. But also in the heart of the Western liberal order, symptoms of political boredom are spreading dangerously. Theatrical political action in the form of street violence and especially “stormings” of government buildings has experienced an upsurge; besides the storming of the US Capitol, similar attacks have been attempted in Paris (2019), Berlin (2020), and Brasilia (2023). One of the positive qualities attributed to populist leaders (and partly claimed for themselves, as in the case of Donald Trump) is that they are less boring than “mainstream” politicians.⁸⁹ However, western populism is still far from the missionary nationalism to which Putin’s regime wants to commit the Russian population. It certainly is a novelty, a change of register, but it barely touches the sacralization in which Putin’s regime shrouds its imperialist politics.

Boredom, as argued in this article, is a result of a specific modern social organization of time, which includes the political sphere. This organization at the same time liberates time for individual usage and thus lays the groundwork for autonomy, but it at the same time burdens the individual to put it to good use. Furthermore, it is based on the exclusion of not only specific forms of life that would endanger their functioning but also values that are incompatible with them. The politics of boredom means a reconquest of these forms of life and values. It tends to be adventurist, destabilizing, violent, and to blow the liberal order and its underlying moral and civic rules. Going beyond existing associations of boredom and political violence and political boredom and social privilege,⁹⁰ the author has argued that it is one’s discontentment with a “story-less” existence within or on the margins of the liberal order that fuels a politics of boredom.

Once the spectacular and monumental have taken place in a society prone to boredom, liberal democracy with its proceduralism, indecisiveness, and slowness might appear unbearably dull and boring. The politics of boredom conquers minds and imaginations through the *borification* of political normality. If political boredom

⁸⁸ Caillois, *Bellone ou la pente de la guerre*, 151–255; Caillois, *L’homme et le sacré*, 219–42; Bataille, *Théorie de la religion*. Likewise, Jan Patočka developed the idea of recurring crises of boredom as breakthroughs of a desire that civilization is not capable to satisfy; Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 95–118.

⁸⁹ Holland and Stephenson, “Trump Bashes Clinton, Promises not to Become Boring.”

⁹⁰ Kustermans, “Boredom and Violence;” Kustermans and Ringmar, “Modernity, Boredom, and War.”

is taken seriously and the liberal democratic order is regarded as something worth protecting, one must approach the question of how to live with boredom. This, philosophically and politically, is the most important question tackled in this article, and it is at the same time the most difficult one. It is somewhat awkward to advocate something that one admits is a malady of life; a malady that is, however, the lesser evil than what can originate when one seeks to escape from it into the realm of the political. This is not only the case with regard to the escalatory and violent tendencies that a politics of boredom can introduce into the liberal-democratic mechanisms of regulating conflict, but also with regard to the interests of the subjects themselves. As it has been stated at the beginning of the article, boredom is often intermingled with different, politically and morally more legitimate motives and sentiments; feelings of injustice, of powerlessness, of being overlooked. Yet boredom makes that time and energy be invested rather in spectacular actions that bring very little relief in relation to one's grievances. After the ecstatic experience of the great event, the true causes of one's discontent remain. *Hyperpolitics* which attracts subjects through its spectacularity and intensity, its effectively loaded narratives and dazzling figureheads, is, as Anton Jäger has argued, a way to political incapacitation of the citizenry to effectively act in its interests. It is only unenchanted, slowly working, bureaucratized creations such as parties and trade unions that are really able to achieve lasting achievements within a bureaucratized, proceduralized, disenchanting, yet non-violent political world.⁹¹

First and foremost, an effective reaction to political boredom presupposes refraining from resorting to pseudo-answers to utopian solutions, such as the idea of boredom being a part of alienation in capitalist society that could be abolished together with capitalism, or the idea of the reinstallation of cyclical time, as it is typical for pre-modern agricultural societies, the frugal time of nature as opposed to the luxury of available, empty time that civilization has brought and which has turned out to be rather a curse than a blessing – an idea that can be extrapolated from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's project for an ideal constitution for the Corsicans.⁹² It is also skeptical toward the already mentioned idea of creating non-harmful substitutes where martial virtues and drives can be acted out, which would be suppressed otherwise for the sake of peace and stability. Such a "moral equivalent of war" would always result in nothing but a substitute, not the "real thing." In order to content oneself with a substitute, one must cherish the order that would be endangered if the real thing was acted out. Once the consciousness of this value gets lost, however, the latter will likely be tried out. As Fukuyama has written, liberal society has a range of substitutes to offer, ranging from mountain climbing to hooliganism. It does not need, as William James has argued, the action of the state for this. However, the problem with the politics of boredom is not only that the ultimately intense political experience is one where the subject is unreservedly engaged, even risking its own death and accepting the use of violence but also one that promises a monumental meaningfulness which its substitutes are inevitably lacking.

If an explosive politics of boredom arises from the sentiment that, in terms of meaningful political action, there is nothing to do, one may get to the root of the trouble by creating spaces of participation that are beneath the level of politics where the personal responsibility of individuals disappears and partaking means dedicating oneself to the cause as a militant or soldier, but not an individual who can be held accountable. The task would be to enable the immediate experience of potency without stepping into the realm of the monumental. Underneath the participation in the great work of history, which appears as the measure for all meaningful activity and experience, condemning thus everything beneath the struggles of world history to be boring, there could be a lot to do and experience in limited spheres of activity and influence that could be created once bureaucratic machinery is replaced by democratic governance. Such limited contexts, where personal relations are upheld, the effects of political actions are immediately visible to those responsible, and there is a familiarity with the realities being dealt with, are the true nourishing ground of an individual's political existence for thinkers as different as the poet and Weimarian local politician Johann Wolfgang von Goethe⁹³ and

⁹¹ Jäger, *Hyperpolitik*; also Jäger, "From Post-Politics to Hyper-Politics."

⁹² Rousseau, *Projet de Constitution pour la Corse*. It is Eoin Daly's merit to have pointed to this highly interesting text in the discussion on political boredom. However, he failed to recognize that there is a clear difference between leisure in the traditional agriculturist society Rousseau envisions and boredom, which is a product of civilization. There is no "ennui" in the proper sense in Rousseau's ideal society. Cf. Daly, "Boredom at the End of History." Also, El Azouzi, "Rousseau et le bonheur de s'ennuyer."

⁹³ Krippendorff, "Wie die Großen mit den Menschen spielen?"

John Dewey, who, perhaps nostalgically, always defended the traditionally decentralized, community-based structure of American democracy.⁹⁴ Political boredom, as a flight into the nebulous realm of great struggles, ideals, and sacrifices, might also arise from the lack of opportunities to influence and shape one's immediate surroundings.

Yet this implies a vast restructuring of democratic polities as they exist today. Though effective as a long-term strategy, it borders on the utopian perspective that we decided to exclude. One may find oneself in situations where one acutely reacts to displays of political boredom. The challenge here is to make the illusions that arise when politics becomes a projection surface for the desire for a meaningful existence discernible as such. This implies a certain acceptance of the limits set on the quest for meaningfulness.

In his analysis of the French Revolution, an event so crucial for politics to become a carrier of what could be called “monumental meaning” for the masses, Edmund Burke attributed, as Ann Mallory has shown, the events in France, which he vehemently opposed, to the French people's proneness to boredom and praised the Englishman's worldly-wise ability to live with *ennui* compared to the Frenchman's unwise desire for sublime spectacles.⁹⁵ The wise people are not responsive to the false promise of “great politics” (Nietzsche).⁹⁶ It would rather accept that a certain degree of unhappiness is inevitable and prefer the smaller misfortune to the greater calamity that war, once the illusory promises and projections have shattered in the face of reality, turns out to be. It is thus able to sustainably live in peace and security. Such an attitude precisely corresponds to Heidegger's second form of boredom, the one against which his own philosophy is directed: an attitude in which the subject engages with things it knows are no big deal, having given up the drive to strive for something greater; a form of contentment with the small and even trivial, which, for Heidegger, is a sign of a culture's nihilism and decadence but is an expression of modesty to which history has educated it in the liberal's eyes.⁹⁷

This civic culture of resignation toward the existential unfulfillment that the liberal temporal dispositive and profane temporality inevitably entail, the cultivation of a certain immunity, and perhaps a posture of serene irony toward the promises of monumental politics, should be pointed out as tasks for a liberal ethics of boredom. Besides philosophy, this would be a task for the arts, notably for literature. Elements of such a cultural dealing with political boredom already exist; they only have to be collected and deliberately used as a resource. For example, in Georg Büchner's drama *Dantons Tod*, the exhausted protagonist, weary from being the figurehead of the Revolution and having to represent the revolutionary slogans, which, through their permanent repetition, have not only lost their persuasiveness but all their initial charismatic quality, no longer puts up any real resistance against his enemies – a parable on the boredom in which revolutionary hyper-politicization inevitably ends.⁹⁸ Danton is a *bon vivant* and an adventurer; but the adventure as such can only succeed as long as it has an end, the episodic is inherent to the adventure, whereas the endless adventure turns into the nightmare of repeating and routinizing what is meant to be eventful, while at the same time demanding the full investment of energies by the individual. It is a situation for which a fanatic, tenacious and at the same time rather narrow-minded character such as Robespierre is better suited than the adventurer Danton, who simultaneously succumbs to *burnout* and *boreout*. A more recent example is the great Bosnian author Dževad Karahasan's final novel, *Introduction into Floating*, the story of an Irish journalist filled with confused Nietzschean notions who, as the occupation of Sarajevo begins in 1992, decides to stay in the city to experience the great event of war up close: a satire on war becoming a projection surface for intellectuals and the idea of war as sublime experience.⁹⁹ The search for the intense and sublime, for the Dionysian festival in the sense of Caillois and Bataille ends, in this case, in a self-destructive, endless drug-party.

⁹⁴ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 143–84.

⁹⁵ Mallory, “Burke, Boredom and the Theatre of Counterrevolution.”

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe*, III, Aphorism 189; Drochon, *Nietzsche's Great Politics*.

⁹⁷ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 106–31.

⁹⁸ Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good*.

⁹⁹ Büchner, *Dantons Tod*; Karahasan, *Einübung ins Schweben*.

There might be two general ways in which the specter of political boredom can be banished: through the hard lessons of history or self-reflection. The first is where the false promises of politics that have become loaded with existential desires are exposed through hard lessons and the catastrophes that follow from pursuing them. Obviously, it contradicts the nature of political action to just wait and let this happen, and it is an irrational stance in view of the damage that can result from the pursuit of illusions until the bitter end. In aesthetic terms, this would be the way of tragedy. The second would be the political equivalent of comedy, which, according to Hegel, in its essence transports the consciousness of the insurmountable inadequacy of the outer world in relation to the claims of the inner world, the human soul.¹⁰⁰ The comical lies in the fact that this inadequacy is, at least for the spectator, obvious from the outset. In this sense, comedy really is a form of disciplining these claims that have no anchorage in the world. In our context, it's about laughing off the dangerous, illusionary desires that arise in boredom.

It's the laughter with which, during the high tide of global liberalism that followed the supposed end of history, people used to answer when the lofty litanies of the old ideologies were intoned. Certainly, there was too much laughing, legitimate political ideas fell victim to it, and the laughter of cynicism concerning all morally and politically higher aspirations was mixed into it.¹⁰¹ Yet ethically and politically, this cynicism might have been far less harmful than the deadly seriousness of today's heroic and devoted political fighters of all sorts will become.

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¹⁰⁰ Hegel, *Ästhetik III*, 305–19.

¹⁰¹ Anton Jäger's depiction of the political culture of the 90s and early 2000; Jäger, *Hyperpolitik*, 9–32.

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