

Bad Infinity, and Beyond

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With the ink of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* still wet, Hegel famously remarked, in a letter to a friend, that he saw the world-spirit on horseback in the shape of Napoleon, as the Emperor and his troops marched into Prussia. It is highly doubtful whether it would have been a consolation for Napoleon's victims to know that their suffering was a necessary stepping-stone in the history of progress, but also for the man himself Hegel's remark can hardly be considered a compliment: the "cunning of reason", after all, implies that the individual acts not on its own volition, but as a mere instrument. Theodor W. Adorno understood that well when, in the 33rd aphorism of *Minima Moralia*, he saw the world-spirit in a V2 rocket:

Had Hegel's philosophy of history embraced this age, Hitler's robot-bombs would have found their place beside the early death of Alexander and similar images, as one of the selected empirical facts by which the state of the world-spirit manifests itself directly in symbols. Like Fascism itself, the robots career without a subject. Like it they combine utmost technical perfection with total blindness. And like it they arouse mortal terror and are wholly futile.

Each era gets the world-spirit it deserves. In the summer of 2021, Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos, in his rocket-ship called *New Shephard*, made his first successful flight outside the earth's atmosphere. Officially, it was not the first private-commercial spaceflight on record (Richard Branson beat him to it by a few weeks), but it was certainly the one that was most discussed. This was, amongst other things, due to the shape of the rocket which, even to those not into Freud, left so little to the imagination; due to Bezos' cynical words of thanks to the exploited Amazon employees to which he owes his billions; and due to the mind-blowing superficiality of the first words he uttered in space ("*who wants a Skittle?*").

The dark irony in Adorno's appropriation of Hegel lies in the image of the world-spirit personified, but blind and without will, "not on horseback, but on wings and without a head". According to Adorno, this "refutes, at the same stroke, Hegel's philosophy of history", for it demonstrates not a progress in self-consciousness and freedom, but merely of instrumental reason, a cunning that merely perpetuates the blind struggle for power that reason attempted to escape. (As he later put it in *Negative Dialectics*: "No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb", a realization he considered as "the horror that verifies Hegel and stands him on his head").

Unlike Hitler's robot-bombs, Jeff Bezos does in fact have a head, as well as a face, although (just like Zuckerberg's) it is a rather generic one. As faceless as these men may seem, and as devoid of soul and character traits (*almost* making one feel nostalgic for the oligarchs and aristocrats of yore, the Bourbons and the Romanovs, the Rockefellers and Carnegies, who were just as ruthlessly exploitative but at least appeared to have personality and taste, and paid for their indulgences in the shape of art and culture), and as much truth there is in Marx's conviction that we cannot blame the individual

capitalist (since “he is only capital personified”), as well as in Adorno’s famous statement that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly”, this also should not keep them off the hook; they are, in fact, subjects.

Perhaps for this very reason, and so as to add a grain of personality to his otherwise mundane appearance, Bezos might have felt compelled to wear a cowboy-hat during the press conference following the spaceflight, by far the most fascinating and haunting element of the entire spectacle. The hat, moreover, also provided yet another image, in which the world-spirit manifested itself as a symbol. In the popular imagination of the twentieth century, the cowboy, hero of the wild west from John Wayne to *Toy Story*’s Woody, became the personification *par excellence* of the discovery and conquest of the “new world”, the *go west* that had encompassed modernity, and according to Hegel even the entire human history; but with that also the retroactive legitimization of white-settler colonialism and the primitive accumulation of which history Marx remarked that it is “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.” This relay-race of domination which had started in ancient Athens, and went via the Roman, Frankish, Dutch and British Empires to the United States, had to end at the West Coast (lest one ended up in the “Far East” again). On the coast of California, the horizon of the so-called “western world” reached its natural, albeit not its actual, limit. As W.J.T. Mitchell wrote: “The ‘westward’ imperative has no more literal or concrete meaning, and can only be replaced by something figurative: cosmic or inner space, *Star Wars* or self-actualization.” Hence, the US West Coast became the habitat of both Hollywood and NASA, and of Burning Man as well as cyberspace.

In Bezos’ cowboy hat, this entire history crystallizes as in a symbol: not only capitalism, colonialism, ecological destruction, and patriarchy seem to be condensed in this single image, but also the entanglement of inner and cosmic space mentioned by Mitchell. In the oligarch’s overblown ego *Star Wars* and self-actualization go hand in hand. Capitalism’s accumulation, expropriation, and expansion acknowledges no natural limits, and hence “it will not die a natural death”, as Benjamin rightfully remarked. If Napoleon was the world-spirit on horseback for Hegel, and the V2 rocket for Adorno, then we have seen the world-spirit in the shape of a Beverly Hills space cowboy, stepping out of a gigantic phallus, and spraying the crowd with champagne.

Biography

Thijs Lijster is assistant professor philosophy of art and culture at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Groningen, and member of the *Krisis* editorial board since 2007.