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The weak subject

Peace and nihilism reconsidered

Abstract Using the notion of subjectivity as a guiding thread, the article explores the implications of European nihilism for the theoretical debate about peace. Most of the continental peace theories have been inspired by schools of thought associated with German Idealism and Marxism and assume a 'strong subject' as a precondition for the social construction of peace. However, the recent debates around 'humanitarian interventions' suggest that a critique of violence that fails to embrace the weakening of the subject is ineffective. Drawing upon the emancipatory interpretation of Nietzsche provided by Gianni Vattimo, the article seeks to recover a critique of violence that is based on a weak notion of subjectivity and no longer invokes any ultimate foundations. Instead, it appreciates the emancipatory and non-violent potential of nihilistic aesthetic experience. From this perspective, peace can only be thought as separate from security, and emancipation as incompatible with violence.

Key words aesthetics · emancipation · fundamentalism · nihilism · non-violence · peace · subjectivity · violence

1 The crisis of subjectivity

The 20th century has often been described as the period of the decline of the subject. Following its appearance and enthusiastic reception in Western culture during the Enlightenment period, the notion of subjectivity experienced its height during the 19th century: in romanticism, in the bourgeois revolutions, in industrialization, in the advent of the great ideologies, in imperialistic capitalism. In literature and art, subjective experience reached its fullest fruition in the great novels of authors such as Marcel Proust, Charles Dickens or Thomas Mann, while in music, the monumental works of Richard Wagner, Franz Liszt and Gustav

Mahler seem to mark the highest development – and the beginning of the decline – of subjective expression.¹

All of these currents seem to be united by a general feeling of dominance and superiority of the subject over history. However, the belief that we are whoever we chose to be and that history is a linear trajectory of progress and civilization has taken on a different significance in this century: large-scale designs intended to bring history under control have generated an enormous amount of violence, leaving the notion of subjectivity weak and confused. Today, the belief in mastery over the globe and in grand historical designs tends to arouse scepticism or preoccupation and is no longer able to mobilize or focus political action and cultural production.

As a result, all those notions of emancipation and peace that rely on a strong, reconciled subject are experiencing a theoretical crisis. This can be said above all of schools of thought based on Hegelian dialectics, of various schools of Marxism, and of German Idealism, which have informed much of the theoretical work about peace. Here, the subject is expressed positively (as in Hegel's 'absolute spirit', Fichte's 'absolute self', and Schelling's 'genius'; but particularly in Kant, whose work is strongly present in current debates)² or else implicitly assumed as a transparent constant.³ Contemporary peace theory has had relatively little to say about the question of subjectivity and often seeks to reconstruct its Hegelian-Kantian-Marxian foundations from within, leaving the problem of subjectivity unaddressed. In this paper, I therefore want to discuss the question of whether it is possible to think peace in a meaningful way *without* relying on strong notions of subjectivity, and at possible implications for peace theory. I want to do this turning to the nihilistic 'shadow' of European modernity, a cultural and philosophical tradition of thought that within the peace studies community usually arouses the strongest of scepticism, and indeed has often been understood as synonymous with violence.⁴ Yet it is precisely this subjectless nature of nihilism that might provide a useful frame of reference for our question.

2 Nietzsche and the decline of the subject

The crisis of subjectivity in the 20th century is often jokingly expressed in the remark that 'God is dead, but man isn't doing so well himself'. The implications of the decline of the subject are dealt with in the work of the same thinker to whom we owe the statement of the death of god to which this joke refers, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's entire work, from his early philological writings to his works as free philosopher and the later writings following the *Zarathustra*, where the notion of the

subject is finally dissolved in the figure of the *Übermensch*,⁵ deals with the problem of subjectivity either implicitly or explicitly. It does so not so much in a traditional philosophical sense, but in connection with a devastating critique of a bourgeois culture that Nietzsche understands as decadent. The heyday of the subject, and the 19th century, one might say, ended on 25 August, 1900, the day of Nietzsche's death.

Therefore, if we want to explore the relationship between subjectivity and violence, it seems indispensable to consider Nietzsche's thinking in this regard. But rather than proposing a direct reading of Nietzsche's thinking, often expressed in powerful and mysterious language, and in order to place Nietzsche into a contemporary historical context, we will follow the interpretation of Nietzsche proposed by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo.⁶ Vattimo's reading of Nietzsche has a particular anti-metaphysical and emancipatory orientation and digresses from the customary image of Nietzsche as a thinker of strength. It therefore seems to provide a good basis for a discussion of the problem of subjectivity inspired by a ideal of a non-violent emancipatory culture. On this basis, as I hope to show, the crisis of subjectivity can be understood not as an apocalyptic scenario that needs to be avoided by 'stabilizing' the subject culturally or politically. Attempts to recover a strong notion of subjectivity are at least potentially violent, while the weak, ephemeral experience of subjectivity of the late modern period seems to allow a new kind of non-violent emancipation that requires us to abandon the identification of peace with strength and security. By way of entering into this discussion, I will briefly summarize the main threads of Nietzsche's ideas concerning the subject.⁷

In general terms, Nietzsche treats the crisis of subjectivity as an unmasking of the superficiality of consciousness. In his early work, this unmasking is performed as a critique of the rationality of Socrates, who distances himself from the mythical, wild, but also vital and sensual Dionysian experience in favour of Apollonian rationality. However, to the extent that this distancing is successful and progresses towards a supposed full self-transparency of consciousness, consciousness becomes decadent by separating itself from the 'spirit of life'. In the writings following the *Origin of the Tragedy*, Nietzsche begins to attack directly the notion of stable and definitive truth that is required for a self-transparent, fully reconciled subject. It is in this connection that Nietzsche announces the fall of the supreme truth in the death of God; a theme addressed for the first time in *The Gay Science*, and one that later keeps recurring as a central element in Nietzsche's critique of truth as well as of Christian morality. In a famous phrase of Nietzsche's, truth becomes a 'mobile armoury of metaphors' whose validity is socially determined. Truth is therefore not separable from the social relationships of dominance; references to 'the truth' only betray the exercise of authority.

Nietzsche shows the problematic nature of a search for a truth that lies outside of the metaphoric, let alone within safe reach of the enquiring rational mind. What is considered as 'true' are statements that are different from lies only in so far as they respect the socially convened rules of constructing truths – truth is therefore nothing else than 'lying according to rules'. But socially convened and imposed language, Nietzsche states, is our only possibility of conscious experience. As consciousness becomes a matter whose contents are not limited to the subject, the definition and social validity of the subject are weakened and enter the realm of the symbolic and linguistic – a process that in today's modern societies with their intensification of communication has become an everyday experience. Therefore, the consciousness of the subject is not independent of the relationships in society. But unlike the philosophers of the Enlightenment, Nietzsche maintains that there is nothing like an ultimate truth or a superior value by means of which the subject could be liberated from its limited consciousness that makes it dependent on social structures, the nature of which it cannot control because everything that it experiences and holds to be true or desirable can itself be defined only from within those relationships.

This is where the crisis of subjectivity, in Nietzsche, becomes nihilism: nihilism is the situation in which man moves away from the centre 'towards the x'. When man is no longer able to relate to the world from the central perspective of the subject, the unmasking of the superficiality of consciousness does not reveal any kind of superior truth, authenticity or essence underneath the mask. Opacity, error and lying seem to be constant companions of experience *against* which nothing can be done that would not lead back to the same kind of experience. In a famous phrase of the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche therefore speaks of the need of 'continuing to dream knowing one is dreaming'. What Nietzsche seems to be anticipating in this phrase is the experience of postmodern culture, a culture in which the dismantling of superior values has generated a crisis of central notions of rationality and history, and the end of the identification of truth with certainty that guided Western thought since Descartes.

After 200 years of unmasking and attempting to establish objective criteria for truth, we seem to begin to become more receptive to the idea that – as Rorty suggests – there is no single truth 'out there',⁸ as every day thousands of new competing truths are offered on TV and computer screens and a thousand new rationalities and cultural repertoires discovered everywhere. Numerous non-linear histories assert their legitimacy. The idea of a solid ultimate reality seems to have become a nostalgic reminiscence in the face of the fictionalization of experience that occurs in the media.

The vertiginous experience of changing realities, of fleeting truths and elusive centres, has created a strong pressure for the reinstating of a central rationality in many realms of society and culture. There must be, so it is often argued, an ultimate instance of authority that helps to decide whether something is right or wrong, true or false. Yet 20th-century history seems to have confirmed Nietzsche's critique of the notion of a single and unassailable truth and the classical notion of subjectivity that is based upon it, by showing that philosophies and ideologies that claim to represent the real nature of man, or the true essence of history, may have made this century the most violent mankind has ever experienced. Even the belief in the progressive nature of technology suffered a setback when it was discovered that it has no internal structure that would prevent it from being used for industrialized killing, mass destruction, and modern forms of slavery. Today, the hope or belief in a central rationality, a central course of history, or a supreme truth seems to have become a trait of social movements that we call fundamentalist. It is within such fundamentalist currents, then, that the strong subject is still existent and considered a useful and desirable point of reference.

3 Fundamentalism, violence and the strong subject

From a nihilistic perspective, fundamentalism could be understood as the imposition of an ultimate 'truth' or some other universally valid foundation against which *no appeal is possible* upon society and culture. It is a movement directed against the advance of the nihilistic tendency of modernization, and therefore is primarily associated with the revival of religious traditionalism. Thanks to a world-view that came into being during the Crusades, it is within the Islamic community that the Western mind can most easily detect fundamentalist currents.

Yet the return within the closed, but safe, horizons of authority is just as much a Western phenomenon. Appeals to the reinstatement of the traditional values of family, community, nation and race are widespread – as are prayer-like repetitions of the progressive power of the free market and of technology. But unlike its 'religious' twin, such 'secular' fundamentalism is *internal* to modern culture, where it seeks to secure a protected zone for what it considers to be the central rationality of modernity. Secular fundamentalism seeks to stabilize a reliable basis for knowledge and for social organization that is grounded in a strong notion of rationality and dialectical model of history. Because of their direct relationship to central notions of rationality and history, such fundamentalisms tend to employ a rhetoric structured around rationality and progress. Among these fundamentalisms, perhaps the

least controversial is the current revival of the free-market doctrine. The market seems to become a last resort for objective and uncontested truths and is understood as something like a law of nature. As one of the last remaining instances of realism, the market defines what is true by attaching a price to it. True is what can be sold. The market constructs the realities it imposes. Finally, the market is understood to preserve the liberal idea of freedom of the citizen *vis-à-vis* the state, with the result that the notion of citizenship becomes increasingly synonymous with consumption; culture is increasingly commercialized, and anti-modern fundamentalist responses are provoked.

Another example of a modern fundamentalism that seeks to stabilize the subject is the revival of empirical methods in science and the arts – precisely at a time when the term ‘objective reality’ has lost its emancipatory significance and turned into a conservative cultural and political factor. Following an increase in methodological diversity in the 1970s and 1980s, empirical research is again setting the standards of legitimacy. In the new life-sciences, for example, things are once again claimed to be mirrored the way they *really are*, and *reliable data* are generated as if the recovery of reality through them were possible and desirable. The market fundamentalism and the new scientific traditionalism are made possible by the accelerated development of information and communication technologies. Consequently, the latter seem to become another fundamentalist value of modern culture. There is no problem, it seems, to which ICTs do not offer a solution, and no politician can allow him- or herself to be anything other than thoroughly optimistic about the social and economic impact of informatization. Information and communication technologies have become the gospel of the present age, spread by missionaries across the globe.

Ironically, modern technology even offers solutions the problem of subjectivity that it has itself helped to generate: according to a widespread enthusiasm, the decoding of the human genome will finally tell us, in a reliable, measurable and objective way, what our real essence is, namely, the deathless, complete and healthy subject – in other words, fully reconciled. Biometric applications such as iris-scanning, face recognition or digital fingerprints also help to bring the weakened modern subject back ‘into shape’ by providing identification technologies that allow no messing, bringing the totalitarian dream of full identity back into the political scene. In the new life-sciences as well as in biometrics, people must be reduced to their undeniable mathematical features, a process that is inherently violent. It is not by coincidence that the appropriation of body measurements precedes the exercise of authority, as, for example, in the 19th-century project of the ‘civilization’ of Africa, or in military recruiting. What is more, people’s social existence is made

dependent on this reduction. Both in genetic technology and in biometric technology we can observe a fusion of interests between government and large corporations: what is the maintenance of power for the former, is a profitable business strategy for the latter. This illustrates a particular dependence of subjectivity on authority in modern societies. We are subjects insofar as our social existence is appropriated by an external authoritarian structure.

By way of summarizing, it appears that the various manifestations of fundamentalism have in common an interest in the strengthening and stabilization of the subject that has been left weak and undefined by the advance of modernization, and that this strengthening is inseparable from the reaffirmation of an authority against which there is no appeal. Fundamentalism tries to achieve this stabilization either through a reversal of modernization or through a strengthening of the notion of history (linear, unitary, globalizing), that very structure that in the end has been responsible for the weakening of the subject itself. As a consequence, the 'modern' fundamentalisms provide the most fertile ground for the emergence of 'anti-modern' fundamentalisms by supplying them with a constant flow of threats. As can easily be observed, both types of fundamentalism can be successful only insofar as they are violent – whether this violence is of a direct or structural nature, or, especially in modernized societies, operates in the symbolic and aesthetic realms and could therefore be called *cultural violence*.⁹

But perhaps the essentially violent nature of strong subjectivity is even more drastically visible in the military context and in war.

4 The soldier as the ultimate subject

In the military, a supreme source of unquestionable authority requires a clear-cut and extremely formalized hierarchy. Within the hierarchy, communication is restricted to exchanging information and expressing orders. Orders are given in a way that reduces the scope for ambivalence, and hence for interpretation and negotiation, to a minimum. This impoverishment of the language culminates in the proliferation of acronyms – short forms of chains of nouns. For clarity's sake, all that does not carry essential information and that does not stand in a clear and traceable relationship to the supreme authority is removed. In the aesthetic realm, uniforms serve the purpose of identification and homogenization. The soldier is the most drastic example of the subject, of a being subjected to a central and unassailable authority.

In the case of warfare, the foundation and violence become almost one. The hierarchical order, reduction of communication and elimination of ambivalence become the supreme law in warfare or when a

'state of emergency' is imposed. Indeed, there is no clearer social relationship than the one between the winner and the loser of a war. The state of war is one where usually democratic structures are abolished or suspended in favour of a full identification with the foundation: God, the Nation, free trade, and more recently even human rights. Communication in the public sphere is subjected to the requirements of warfare, information becomes synonymous with propaganda: a prayer-like repetition of the supreme truth.

From a nihilistic perspective, war can be understood as nothing else but the organized and forceful elimination of difference, the forceful sub-jection of the other, the reduction of diversity to a common standard against which no appeal is possible. In this way, war becomes the ultimate horizon of history, the 'beyond' of history, the source and destination of all history. War becomes identical with metaphysics. All reality can be traced back to war, and all reality can be destroyed in war. Indeed, war can in this sense be understood as 'the father of all things' as Heraklit observed. Calderón de la Barca, the Spanish 17th-century poet, expressed the same thought in a less paternalistic and more 'enlightened' manner when he referred to war as the *última razón* – the last cause or reason that silences any questions. When the arms speak, men fall silent: the ultimate foundation is self-explanatory, self-imposing, violent both in effect and nature, a total eclipse of language.

Given this particular relationship between military culture and warfare on the one hand, and the subject on the other, it is not surprising that attempts have been made to reconstruct the subject, from within the military and martial contexts, which act as a safe zone beyond the reach of the weakening or 'decadent' influences of modern culture. One example of such an attempt is the work of Ernst Jünger.¹⁰ As is known, Jünger understands war as a situation in which the subject, thrown into the extreme experience of violence and death, comes face to face with its actual essence, which under normal circumstances it forgets due to a lack of conflict with the exterior world. The worker and the soldier are figures that, unlike the bourgeois individual, do not shy back from a-historical 'elementary powers', they are rather an embodiment of those powers. Natural disasters, social upheavals and war are the soil upon which the worker and the soldier thrive and come into the succession of the timid and weak bourgeois individual.

But there are also 'progressive' reconstructions of the subject. The revolutionary pathos that surrounds much emancipatory thinking and practice seems not so distant from Jünger's vision as is often assumed: here, too, an implicit notion of strength is associated with the revolutionary man. The freedom fighter, the *guerillero* and the terrorist only truly exists socially because of his or her dedication and complete sacrifice to *the cause*. Not surprisingly, the authority of the cause tends

to translate into hierarchies that resemble the military not only in their structure, but also in their use of uniforms and other military symbols.

In the light of this the notion of subjectivity is seen as dependent, to a greater or smaller extent, upon authority and violence. Whatever the cases we take, whether the various fundamentalisms, the authoritarian ideologies, or the military: the strong subject requires a violent horizon. In the following two sections, I want to explore what the meanings of a peace with a weak subject could be in contemporary Western culture. I will first try to specify some of the key characteristics of this culture, and then move on to discuss how the conflict between strong and weak notions of subjectivity is negotiated.

5 Repressive realism and Musil's 'sense of possibility'

In the culture of late modernity, the decline of the subject is mirrored by a decline of a coherent and centralized notion of reality. The 'hard facts' that positivist science attributed to the objective world are losing their foundation. It was within the area of theoretical physics itself, through Einstein, and later Heisenberg, Bohr and others, that the hope for a fully calculable and ordered behaviour of natural phenomena had to be abandoned in favour of a 'weaker' conception of reality, in which the objects of nature have 'tendencies' to behave in certain ways rather than others, and these tendencies cannot be understood independently from the subject that observes them. A weakening of the hard sense of reality inherited from Newton has taken place. The 'sense of reality' is increasingly being replaced by a substitute: what Robert Musil in the *Man without Qualities* calls a 'sense of possibility'. Musil writes:

But if there is such a thing as a sense of reality – and no one will doubt that it has its *raison d'être* – then there must also be something that one can call a sense of possibility. . . . The 'sense of possibility' might be defined outright as the capacity to think how everything could 'just as easily' be, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.¹¹

Musil's speculation, written in the early 1930s, might just as easily refer to our contemporary culture and post-industrial societies. The 'sense of possibility' seems to be taking over from what once was 'the reality'. This can be observed not only in philosophy and physics, but also in the new global economy. It is there that Musil's observation seems to have entered into a peculiar vertiginous relationship with the 'hard core' of realism, the principles of a globalizing capitalist market economy. These principles that still are considered something like laws of nature are undermined by a world of finance where 'options' and 'futures' – terms that express a possibility rather than a reality – are

treated as if they were 'real'. The virtual economy is taking over from the economy of goods and services: most financial transactions do not relate to 'real' economic values, but to other transactions, to degrees of likelihood, to interest rates, currency fluctuations, financial forecasts and insider reports. Basic concepts of capitalist economies, such as 'property', 'profit', or 'labour', are rapidly replaced by weaker economic concepts such as 'open source' or 'access'.¹²

This process of substituting for the sense of reality a sense of possibility is perhaps generating the most intense noise in the area of the media, in particular the new electronic media, where the line that separates reality from fiction seems to become irrelevant. It is in the media that a single reality becomes increasingly difficult to conceive: it disappears among a myriad of different stories and images whose claim of mirroring something that occurs in actual reality is losing any credibility. In fact, as Vattimo comments: 'What could freedom of information, or even the existence of more than one radio or TV channel, mean in a world where the norm is the exact reproduction of reality, perfect objectivity, the complete identity of map and territory?'¹³

In spite of the insecurity that goes along with fictionalization, claims to a single, objective reality are increasingly experienced as problematic, because they, like the strong subject, rely on a process of reduction. When reality is conceived as a single system of rational order, of cause and effect, the model of 'scientific' objectivity is simply extended to the totality of being. All being needs to be reduced to pure presence that can be manipulated, measured, substituted, dominated and organized, a process that ultimately also affects men and women, whose interiority and historicity are reduced to the same level. Perhaps in view of this, as Vattimo remarks, 'the loss of our sense of reality . . . is not such a great loss after all'.¹⁴

Given the problematic nature of applying scientific objectivity to human affairs, the response to this process of dissolution has principally been an ethical one. Following the tradition initiated by Kant, humanness can be defined in moral categories: we are human not because of what we want, nor what we are capable of, but because of what we *ought to do*. Kant's categorical imperative has been at the centre of an ethics that has tried to stabilize the subject against the weakening tendencies of modernization by defining it in moral terms of transcendental origin. The American Constitution, the French Revolution and universal human rights would not be conceivable without such transcendentalism. Yet this ethical response, which has also informed much of the work of peace studies, runs into difficulties as soon as Kant's vision of a *Weltbürgergesellschaft* (world civil society) becomes technically feasible and claims to cultural autonomy enter into a conflict with universal moral imperatives. At this point, emancipatory strategies that

draw upon universal notions of morality can easily get entangled with violence. This has become visible not only in various liberatory movements that fossilized after the revolution, but also in international politics and the tragic outcome of many ‘peace-keeping’ or ‘peace-making’ missions, most sadly, perhaps, the infamous intervention of NATO in Yugoslavia, which was able to legitimize itself by references to human rights, and which, for the same reasons, met with almost no critique: the ethical foundation of liberation also served as the foundation for violence, and the basis on which resistance to war has been expressed for two centuries has been occupied by war itself.¹⁵

This transformation of emancipatory thinking into a conservative cultural and political current is itself an aspect of what could be called the ‘realist’ response directed against the weakening and dissolving tendencies of late modernity. Moreover, the loss of the sense of reality is accompanied by loss of security and of capacity to generate a ‘realist’ response; that can be observed in most realms of society and culture.¹⁶ Among these responses are the various forms of fundamentalism already mentioned.

When we take as serious the nihilistic diagnosis of the devaluation of highest values and the loss of a central rationality, then we cannot hope to free ourselves from the repression of realism by directly acting against it. Instead, we need to look at realism, to look at the *representation* of realism, i.e. we need to look at emancipation from the perspective of aesthetics.

6 Aesthetization and emancipation

The diagnosis of the weakening of metaphysics that blurs the contours of the subject and creates a pluralistic and fictionalized experience of reality, then, does not mean that emancipation becomes impossible, but only that it can no longer be conceived as a process of identification with an ultimate foundation. This is the case, for example, in Hegel’s dialectical model of history and in the notion of the Absolute Spirit, but also in Marxism and in other subject-centred doctrines of liberation. It can also be found in religion, in esoteric practices, and in a million newsstand books that promise to help their readers become ‘who they really are’.

In order to learn more about how the weakening of subjectivity can be understood as a positive chance for emancipation that excludes violence, we can once again turn to Nietzsche. The weakening of the ultimate foundation is referred to by Nietzsche as the ‘death of God’. With the death of God occurs a devaluation of the highest value, a delegitimization of supreme authority, an ungrounding of last principles.

This weakening of last principles, which would allow the objective verification or falsification of statements, and therefore the death of God, itself cannot be a statement that lays a claim to universal validity. It offers no new foundation, and is therefore not an atheist statement. Rather than concerning the question of the existence or non-existence of God, Nietzsche's death of God can be understood as the erosion of the principle of reality.

In an anticipation of the ambivalent character of the messages and images of today's modern media, one consequence of the death of God for Nietzsche, to which he refers in the *Twilight of Idols*, is that the 'real world finally becomes a myth': 'The "real world" – an idea no longer of any use, not even a duty any longer – an idea grown useless, superfluous, *consequently* a refuted idea: let us abolish it!'¹⁷ However, the true world as a myth is not something that merely conceals another, a true world that could still be retrieved by a process of unmasking, neither is it a substitute for the real world, in the sense that, since the real world no longer exists, the fictionalized world is as good as the real one, so that it becomes another coherent reality. 'We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps? . . . But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*'¹⁸ In Nietzsche's writings, this is a significant moment: it is the moment of the appearance of Zarathustra, the teacher of the *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch* is the man capable of realizing that God is dead because 'we have killed him', and of living with serenity in spite of it. But since God is dead, man no longer needs to be a subject. The *Übermensch* embodies a humanness beyond subjectivity. The moment that Nietzsche lets a madman announce the death of God to the crowd in the marketplace is the moment when subjectivity begins its decline. It marks the moment after which being human requires us to think beyond the subject.

What Nietzsche refers to as the true world's becoming a myth is, in our actual experience, the undermining of the sense of reality that occurs in modern societies. But this undermining cannot occur as complete destruction, as a 'falsification': it only means that the last principles have become relative, they have fallen off their throne from which they exercised their authority and governed our thinking and culture. The last principle which lends the real world its reality is no longer a reliable or useful point of reference. What this means is that we have to live without the security bestowed by the last principles, and that we have the possibility of freeing ourselves from the authority of the last principle. However, this freedom is of a particular nature: it is no longer a freedom that can be defined by correspondence to a superior truth, only as a freedom *from* the authority of the first principle. Yet this freedom can also be given a positive significance when we take into consideration

that the weakening of the last principle is not merely an apocalyptic event that results in an all-out 'anything goes' culture; it also provides the opportunity for a renewed appreciation of proximity: of sensual experience, of the body, of language, art and culture.

The fictionalization of the world of which Nietzsche speaks occurs in contemporary culture as *aestheticization*. Aestheticization, then, takes on a political and social significance that moves it beyond its traditional understanding as the philosophy of taste. In contemporary societies, characterized by an intensification of communication and the loss of a central notion of reality, history or rationality, experience crystallizes in the aesthetic. In other words: when the subject is weakened, aesthetics can no longer be confined to a private musing that strictly belongs within the realm of the subject.

Therefore, the aesthetic ideals transmitted by the media, in art and in the culture industry (fashion, design, architecture, music), can no longer be considered irrelevant to a thinking and a political acting that seeks to liberate itself from authority and gain autonomy, *precisely when subjectivity is in decline*. Emancipation understood as aestheticization must pay attention to these ideals and, in particular, seek to emphasize the continuation of aestheticization against what we called the temptation of realism. In order to be able to do this, we can ask the question: what are the characteristics of an aesthetics that allow no 'realist' instance to stop the process of aestheticization? The work of Walter Benjamin provides a useful frame of reference.

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin points out that modern art can no longer pretend to have a unique 'aura' that accounts for an aesthetical experience on the part of the viewer.¹⁹ In order for an aesthetical experience to be possible at all, a work of art must give rise to an experience that contains the element of *shock*. Works of art that are susceptible to reproduction and that have lost their 'aura' can no longer aim at harmony and integration, as reconciliation between exterior and interior experience. Through the possibility of mechanical reproduction; the work of art begins to leave its traditional institutional confines, giving rise to the general aestheticization that Nietzsche seems to allude to when he speaks of the 'true world becoming a myth'. Today, aesthetic experience is as much part of a normal workday and of the 'distracted perception' we engage in when 'surfing' the Internet, watching TV or buying clothes, as it is part of visits to exhibition halls and art galleries. Modern art seeks to distance itself from the customary and trivial flow of images, and immediate enjoyment has often sought refuge in aporetic positions of 'self-negation' either by using 'negative' forms of expression, such as silence, absence of colour, disharmony, or by infiltrating distracted perception through a particular choice of

location or time (as in street art).²⁰ The aesthetic experience of modernity is characterized by this element of shock: a moment of interruption in habitual patterns of perception, a *disorientation* rather than integration.

This disorientation is nothing else than the consequence of the weakening of the first principle applied to aesthetics itself. When emancipation can no longer be understood as identification with the truth and is therefore no longer an overcoming of estrangement, then the emancipatory potential of aestheticization needs to be looked for in the disorienting and distorting character of aesthetics. This line of emancipation is possible precisely because of the loss of reality in contemporary culture, and it finds itself in opposition to 'realist' currents. The 'realist currents' aesthetics is the same as opposes continuing aestheticization and instead proposes a metaphysical aesthetics of harmony and conciliation. As Vattimo observes, the aesthetics of mass culture that covers the world of markets and tamed information with a large pink veil is still shaped and styled after a model of conciliation and wholeness as in Hegel's notion of classical beauty. In contemporary culture, this kind of aesthetical monoculture enters into a perfect union with the repressive 'realism' of the market that stands in the way of a free unfolding of aestheticization.

Emancipation as aestheticization therefore needs to emphasize avant-garde and conflictual aesthetic notions. It requires to move beyond the metaphysical aesthetic models traditionally associated with violence or peace. Only if it achieves the detection of the potential violence in the fusion of realism and *kitsch* can it be more than nostalgia for an ideal world.

7 Beyond the subject

The weakening of the subject, then, demands an understanding of emancipation as radical aestheticization that is not confined within the 'realistic' notions of the market and opposed to the classical ideals of beauty that today appear as *kitsch*. This is the consequence of a nihilistic diagnosis of modernity expressed by Nietzsche. The implications that this development has for subjectivity as such are contained in Nietzsche's notion of the *Übermensch*. As we have already noted, Zarathustra, the teacher of the *Übermensch*, appears as soon as the 'real world' is 'abolished'.

The problem with the interpretation of the *Übermensch* has been the temptation to understand him/her as a strong subject, an interpretation that is driven to its extreme when the *Übermensch* is understood as a synonym of *Herrenmensch*, a mad, dominating and cruel charac-

ter. Yet in the light of the death of God, the loss of the first principle, the erosion of the sense of reality, etc., this interpretation seems to be rather forced, especially when taking into account that the strong subject must rely on a strong sense of objectivity that can no longer be taken for granted in the pluralistic and aestheticized realities of late modernity. Yet it is at exactly this point in history that Nietzsche's *Übermensch* appears. This makes it difficult to think of the *Übermensch* in terms of super-human strength, let alone domination. But the *Übermensch* cannot be understood as a *strong* subject because he/she can no longer be thought as a subject at all. The *Übermensch* is the step beyond subjectivity taken by Nietzsche. This step beyond subjectivity does not allow the creation of an all-mighty and dominant superman; instead, the *Übermensch* seems to display characteristics that Nietzsche referred to as a 'good character'; in fact, the abolition of the true world in the *Twilight of Idols* results in the return of the *bon sens* and of cheerfulness. Also, Nietzsche remarks that when the belief in an objective order of things is no longer present and no single truth is available for support, it is not the most violent man that will triumph, but the most moderate, who is capable of a certain irony *vis-à-vis* him/herself. In contemporary culture, this may refer to a type of individual that is no longer nostalgic for a solid reality and that is capable of appreciating appearances as such, without the need of classification, exploitation and elimination of ambivalence. It is also an individual capable of appreciating difference and plurality. The strength of the *Übermensch* is the ability to be weak, and not to abandon the longing for security in favour of the appreciation of proximity. All these are characteristics that make life in this uncertain age more bearable and that make somebody more agreeable to live with. Most importantly: the move beyond subjectivity is also a move beyond the violence implicit in the metaphysical notions of subjectivity and objectivity.

In the light of this interpretation of the *Übermensch*, and of the relationship between violence and subjectivity, this move beyond the subject seems to indicate a way towards a process of emancipation that excludes violence. When emancipation can no longer be simply conceived as authenticity, as correspondence between the ideal and the real, it becomes pointless to want to employ violent means to achieve this authenticity, and no ultimate foundation can be evoked to justify violence. Emancipation then coincides with the area outside of violence. The question is then no longer one of emancipation with or without violence, of armed struggle or not, of 'humanitarian intervention'— yes or no? In the context outlined, emancipation and violence become mutually exclusive.²¹

8 Peace or security?

For peace theory, this relationship between subjectivity and violence could be understood as an encouragement to develop an understanding whereby peace is no longer defined as *strength*. Notions of strength have accompanied peace theory for two centuries, when peace has been understood as something that in the end shall prevail because its inner structure conforms to a superior truth that war wraps in cloud. Thinking peace as strength has, above all, led to a social organization of peace as security, to the result that in practice the two terms have become almost synonymous: without security, so the common wisdom suggests, there can be no peace. However, it is becoming painfully evident – and I would cite the new humanitarian interventionism as one particularly striking example – that peace understood as strength is a peace whose significance remains dependent on violence, which can therefore only be politically defined by its relationship to war and which cannot be thought or practised without war as the horizon of thinking and as the *ultima ratio* of politics. Indeed, such a peace is prepared in war, and it is this understanding of peace that the generals mean when they speak of peace as their profession.

Peace as strength leaves the competence for peace in the hands of the security experts from the government and the military. Rather than abolishing war, the idea of a peace stronger than war has initiated a secularization of warfare. Its achievement has been a civilizing of the objectives and modes of legitimation of warfare, a progress from wars fought for the crude imposition of national pride or selfish power, to wars fought for sublime humanitarian motives. Peace thought as strength has brought war conceived as humanness, a historical situation in which war becomes, as it were, the better peace. In such a situation ethical criticism is bound to fail as the war machinery, by being able to refer to norms such as human rights, has itself occupied the universal ethical notions upon which the critique of violence has long rested. It is in this kind of ‘humanitarian militarism’ that the dependence of the strong subject on violence is exposed to the full.

This disturbing development does pose a significant challenge to the conceptualization of peace, and it is this kind of perpetuation of violence with changing legitimizations that might encourage a thinking of peace along the nihilistic lines sketched here. A re-evaluation of the significance of nihilism could result in a notion of peace that is no longer seen as a unitary and universal concept, a practice that allows it to be used as an ethical justification of violence. It could result in the insight that peace must be seen as independent from security, and as a notion that

in contemporary culture derives its meaning through emancipation from subjectivity in a radical aesthetics.

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Notes

- 1 For a discussion of the significance of 19th-century music and cultural violence cf. Wolfgang Dietrich, 'Kulturelle Gewalt als Mittel und Indikator von Herrschaft im Weltsystem', in Klaus Zapotoczky and Petra Gruber (eds) *Demokratie versus Globalisierung? Plädoyer für eine umwelt- und sozialverträgliche Weltordnung* (Frankfurt: Brandes & Apsel/Südwind, 1999), pp. 166–84.
- 2 Cf., for example, Vicent Martínez Guzmán (ed.) *Kant: La paz perpetua doscientos años después* (Valencia: Nau llibres, 1997) and James Bohman and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann (eds) *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant's Cosmopolitan Ideal* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1997).
- 3 Gianni Vattimo has dealt with the problem of subjectivity, and the failure of orthodox Marxism and related emancipatory thought to take into account the 'internal' repression of the subject, in his book *Il soggetto e la maschera. Nietzsche e il problema de la liberazione* (Milan: Fabri-Bompiani, 1974). The book was written during the crisis in theory experienced by the Italian left in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when some groups turned to political violence, and it bears the impress of that time.
- 4 Cf., for example, Max Müller, 'Der Friede als philosophisches Problem', in Dieter Senghaas (ed.) *Den Frieden denken* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995). Here, Müller excludes Nietzsche's work from his consideration of peace as a philosophical problem, describing it as an 'absolute philosophy of war . . . that can only view peace as a manifestation of decadence' (pp. 28f.).
- 5 The most common English translation of *Übermensch* is 'superman'. Yet the meaning of the German *über-* does not correspond exactly to 'super'. It also means 'above', 'beyond', 'across', or 'trans-', so that the *Übermensch* could also be translated as 'beyond-man'. Vattimo prefers this translation to 'superman', but in his writings leaves the word in German most of the time. We are going to proceed in the same fashion here.
- 6 For a fuller discussion of Vattimo's reading of Nietzsche, cf. his *Introduzione a Nietzsche* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1985); and *Il soggetto e la maschera*, cited in note 3. For a general introduction to Vattimo's thinking in English, cf. Jon R. Snyder's introduction in *The End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988). This book also contains two of Vattimo's essays on the significance of nihilism in contemporary thought (Chapters 1 and 10).

- 7 Here I follow Chapter 6 of Gianni Vattimo's *Etica della interpretazione* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1989).
- 8 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 9 Johan Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', *Journal of Peace Research* 27(3) (1990): 291–305.
- 10 Cf. Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, 3rd edn (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1932).
- 11 Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Secker & Warburg, 1955) Vol. 1, p. 12.
- 12 Cf. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: How the Shift from Ownership to Access Is Transforming Capitalism* (Hammondsworth, Mx: Penguin, 2000). On intellectual property and open source cf. Lawrence Lessig's *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
- 13 Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 6f.
- 14 *ibid.*, p. 8.
- 15 For a more detailed discussion of this problem cf. the author's, 'The Contamination of Universalism: Human Rights after Kosovo', *Human Rights Review* 2(2) (2000): 71–83.
- 16 Ironically, the media themselves, where the loss of the sense of reality is perhaps most pronounced, offer their comments on realist responses. On the one hand, there is a proliferation of *kitsch* in the cinema and TV designed to provide an orientation of the viewer by offering a harmonious integration of interior and exterior experience, a sense of 'fullness' and conciliation generated by the spectacle of an ideal world lost in the bustle of modern life above which it is elevated. But 'reality' is also offered directly as a product in the so-called 'reality soaps' with titles such as *Big Brother*. In the context of realist cultural responses to the weakening of subjectivity, these productions have a significance that goes beyond their commercial and their entertainment value. Their intent to show people and life 'as they really are', without scripts, roles and make-up demands something like complete transparency. The view of 'reality' is possible only when the lives of the participants (they are not understood as actors) are exposed in full and no privacy is allowed. Viewed from this perspective, reality soaps appear as complete caricatures of the self-transparency of the Hegelian absolute spirit, of the full unfolding of subjectivity that goes along with full knowledge of everything at all moments.
- 17 'Die "wahre Welt" – eine Idee, die zu Nichts mehr nützlich ist, nicht einmal mehr verpflichtend, – eine unnützlich, eine überflüssig gewordene Idee, folglich eine widerlegte Idee: schaffen wir sie ab!' Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Götzendämmerung', in *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe* (Place at proof: publisher at proof, date?), Vol. 6, p. 81; hereafter KSA. Cited translation by R. J. Hollingdale, in Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist*, (Hammondsworth, Mx: Penguin, 1990), p. 50.
- 18 'Die wahre Welt haben wir abgeschafft: welche Welt blieb übrig? die scheinbare vielleicht? . . . Aber nein! mit der wahren Welt haben wir auch die

- scheinbare abgeschafft!*' KSA, Vol. 6, p. 81; this translation by R. J. Hollingdale, in Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist*, p. 51.
- 19 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, 2nd edn (London: Fontana, 1992), pp. 215–44.
 - 20 For a more detailed discussion of the significance of aestheticization for art cf. Vattimo, 'The Death or Decline of Art', in his *End of Modernity* (London: Polity, 1988), pp. 51–64.
 - 21 Nevertheless the NATO intervention was again discussed in these terms, with Habermas understanding it as a childhood disease of the emerging world civil society; cf. Jürgen Habermas, 'Humanität oder Bestialität?', *Die Zeit* 18 (1999): 1.

