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Impropriety

In the long-winded and often tiresome discussions devoted to the problem of possible meanings of the word “postmodern” the notion of identity is undoubtedly one of the key terms around which the vying sides construct their basic arguments whether they be “conservative” or “progressive.” The most familiar issue is, of course, whether the postulated postmodern identity (if it exists) is in fact just a developed form of the modern identity, or whether it is a new phenomenon that radically breaks with the modern as an authoritarian paradigm. Such discussions, although they have been pursued for at least the last three decades, have not led to any satisfying conclusions. One of the points of this essay will be that the reason for this might be at least partially due to the overhasty neglect in the analyses of the construction of an identity, and especially in its postmodern mutation, of the second term under our surveillance, that is to say, the nature of property and its effects.

It is said that in traditional (“primitive”) societies identity was not problematic. One grew to become a functional member of one’s tribe or clan and his/her identity was a product of a mythical structure which prepared one’s route in life in advance and absolutely. Such a structure was free from internal rupture because an identity crisis was within its bounds unthinkable. Whether such a society was really the case or whether it constitutes just a belated dream of the lost immanence of modernity is not the issue here, yet one has to remark that what we have just described as the “traditional identity” is not identity in the full sense of this word which implies agency that is the outcome of a separation: I am the place of my free activity that constitutes me as myself for myself as well as within the public sphere. The “invention” of this type of identity belongs to the Greeks and is connected to two related developments which were not the case in “primitive” societies. The traditional society knows only functional property, i.e. the property of the tools necessary to survival in

the world and the property which is in its entirety the product of one's work. Such property is not private because it does not serve an individual as different and opposed to the member of the tribe. Which brings us to the related separation of the public and private spheres that is already in place in the world of the Greeks and it is only here that we can speak about property and identity in their proper sense.

Yet, the Greek form of property is not property in the modern, abstracted sense of this word. First of all, property constitutes one's place in the world and as such it has no exchange value (no value in the modern sense): losing property means being excluded from the public sphere of the society of free men and entering a lower order of the slave, whether formally enslaved or slaving to the necessity of selling one's talents and abilities in order to survive. The Greek identity is based on property yet in the mode of negating it: I, as a free individual, am everything that in me overreaches the pedestrian necessity of the maintenance of my individual physical life. For the Greeks property does not mean the riches or it means this only secondarily, since a rich slave remains a slave and a poor citizen is still a citizen. The difference between them is crucial: a man without his own place is no longer a man, and therefore has no identity. This is because man is constituted (e.g. for Aristotle) not by work, i.e., his necessary interactive encounter with the materiality of the world, but by *praxis*, i.e. the activity which is the expression of my freedom and, among other things, my freedom from necessity. Being rich is important only as far as the problem of necessity is concerned: poverty forces a free man to act as a slave; a man that is relatively rich is the master of his necessities of life and therefore free to overreach his private and particular life and enter the common, public world where (and this is the only place) he can express himself as a free man. The private sphere is always perceived as a bit indecent realm of necessity and mysterious (brute?) things that should remain hidden as birth and death. In this sense property remains the foundation of identity, yet this foundation is perceived as *indecent* (although necessary). This explains the relative lack of development of ancient economies where the wealth is not an end in itself, and therefore it is enough for the system to reproduce itself without the infinite accumulative necessity. Identity of the Greeks is always the public identity that implies the continuity in discontinuity, i.e., on the one hand, different people see a thing from different perspectives, yet there is no question of the possibility (a typical modern threat) of each of them seeing something else: they know that they see different aspects of the same thing.¹

¹ The above paragraph is based on: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Ch. II and Ch. III (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

As far as the question of identity is concerned, the modern paradigm introduces certain new developments of which probably the most important are its mutability and enhanced self-reflexivity. First of all, the range of available patterns of identity rapidly widens and, apart from that, the available social roles become increasingly the subject of one's conscious choice as one is freer to make and remake his identity according to his own will. To summarise very briefly, this concept of modern identity has two different incarnations: identity as a substantial self and identity as an existential project.² The first, being to a large extent the descendant of the absolutely unique essential and self-identical substance which was the immortal soul itself,³ was the pervasive motif of the western philosophy from Descartes' *res cogitans* to Husserl's transcendental ego and is presented as the already given, innate, unique and stable nature of the thinking subject whose task is to shed the illusions of the tradition and return to its truthful essence in the process of thinking itself. The second, which in different guises one can encounter in the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger or Sartre, renounces the pre-given substance of the self in favour of the creation of the authentic individual as a task to be accomplished by him/her. Both of these attitudes however lead to what by some people is considered to be an exclusively modern malady, i.e., the state of anxiety, which is the effect of freedom of choice. When the aim is either a return to or an arrival at an authentic identity and the accomplishment of this task is left entirely in our hands, the possible choice implies that one is always in danger of making a wrong choice and therefore wasting one's life living in the mode of self-delusion. Hence the ongoing identity-crisis which is modernity itself. Moreover, the wished-for stable and authentic identity (a normative goal), even if it be realised, has to be recognised as such also by the others who ultimately constitute it in its identity but to whom the being-authentic of somebody else's identity is not available as such.⁴ This way the process of authentication can never be accomplished and the modern subject is constantly in the state of crisis.

The repeatedly employed solutions to such a crisis are two well-known projections compensating for a lack one is: either collapsing back into a transcendence or leaping forward into an immanence. The first solution is to deny entirely the possibilities of modernity and keep presupposing "the missing part" outside the world: there is the origin and the principle of the world that is other than the world and into which the world will ultimately vanish (the God of monotheist religions). Such a principle has been revealed and, in order to fill up the lack in oneself, one cannot help but fashion one's identity

² Douglas Kellner, "Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities," in *Modernity and Identity*, eds. S. Lash and J. Friedman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 142.

³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245 C.

⁴ Kellner, p. 142.

according to the provided pattern (considering all other patterns as existentially and socially dangerous nonsense because the pattern is the guarantor of both a “healthy” identity and a “healthy” community). The second solution is properly modern: seemingly denying a transcendental prosthesis it finds the “filler” of the lack within the world. Being conscious that the unfulfilled state is the identity’s absolute condition it creates a myth of the figure of the absolute subjectivity: the *Führer*. Since, in modernity, the identity anxiety is a mass phenomenon, some ideologues worked on the knowledge that “inasmuch as the masses have no proper identity, only a myth can provide them with one by posing a fiction in which their unity is embodied, depicted – in short: in which they auto-envisage or auto-represent themselves as Subject.”⁵ In the figure of the *Führer* a group (an organisation, a society, a nation, etc.) projects its essence as that which is most proper and common to all of them (precisely what they actually lack) and what constitutes the (mythical) reality of the organic community as the communion between its members, i.e. as “*ein totale Staat* knowing no division, unless it be minimal and intended solely to relate the social body to itself between the beloved Chief and his loving subjects.”⁶ An identity thus emptied and at the same time fulfilled recognises no exteriority or otherness, no division as such.

The problematics of identity in postmodern theory might be taken as a development of the Nietzschean motif but without its “authenticating” coordinates. In the postmodern world identity becomes increasingly fragmented and incoherent. It is claimed that since the subject is free to choose his identity at will, and since this process is open-ended, in the sense that it has no other goal than the immediate satisfaction of certain desires, then there is not such thing as authenticity and the identity disintegrates “into a flux of euphoric intensities”⁷ that do not offer any coherence other than accidental. The series of fragmentary and short-lived identities refuse to crystallise into anything stable.

Such an image of identity that at least allows a certain kind of will or agency is sometimes pushed even further. Perhaps the best and most famous example of it is a “television identity” as described by Jean Baudrillard. For him television is pure noise, a whirlpool of images whose number and speed of circulation reach the verge of perceptual overload. Such a turnover results in the implosion of identity where the images no longer have any discernible effects and thus they lose their signifying function and turn into pure ecstasy of a meaningless spectacle which makes any kind of hermeneutic activity futile.

⁵ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, “The Freudian Subject,” in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, eds. E. Cadava et al. (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁷ Kellner, p. 144.

Such spectacle is by its very definition one-dimensional, depthless: whatever it presents has to be there on the surface for a very simple reason that an imploded identity is the apathy itself, drained of any constitutive energies and closed within its own prefabricated house of mirrors.⁸

Those open-ended or imploded identities are presented as a new phenomenon that constitutes postmodernity's break with the modern paradigm in which the surface phenomena had their actual (hidden) meaning, so therefore also with the problems of ideology as well as political economy (the new identity is not primarily the product of the relations of production and it is not immediately connected to the hard facts of economic reality). Leaving alone for now the obvious empirical arguments to the contrary (the media propose a very limited number of identity patterns for emulation) and remaining on a somewhat more abstract level we can ask whether the above are not somewhat premature conclusions grounded in a restricted concept of the subject.

The postmodern structure of the (lack of) identity takes the subject to consist of no stable features or ground, yet what makes the same subject a stable *place* of the turnover of pleasures or ecstasy is the *desire* that ultimately constitutes the being-identical of the subject: whatever identity the subject momentarily takes on goes through the stable point of pleasurable digestion. The effect of such a situation is that the turnover of intensities cannot cease because its whole identity exists as the point of absorption of pleasure without which this integrative force would stop operating and the identity would disperse into veritable non-existence.

Such a structure, however seems to remind us of another that has been analysed over and over again: also the capital is this force whose sole purpose is its ever increasing speed of accumulation which is its only way of survival because otherwise it would disperse being used up in the process of ever increasing consumption.⁹ Another pertinent feature of the capital here is a certain way in which it takes the world away: it transforms the world into nothing other than the capital's reflection. Because human beings become themselves only as far as they interact with the world as their place or space, everything in the world has a use value and this term designates precisely the place of meeting where the object and the subject cease to represent each other, where the world defers its separate existence as the object of knowledge and where the subjective and the objective lose their meaning becoming alterities in communication, i.e. *praxis* itself. Such place of community is within the logic

⁸ See especially: "The Order of Simulacra," in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. I. H. Grant (London: Sage, 1993), pp. 50–86; and "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S. F. Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 1–42.

⁹ Such is the capital's law: increased production *always* goes hand in hand with increased consumption since the resources of the latter are practically infinite.

of the capital abstracted into the exchange value, which is nothing other than a mirror image of the capital as it takes the world as world away. The exchange value is a universal measure with which everything can be measured, yet an image-representation which the measuring provides is not the image of the world as world (this is given only in *praxis/use* value) but of the capital. In such a world also initiative is lost: in spite of the superficial fervour of economic activity both the worker and the capitalist are essentially apathetic because they are deprived of their own will and are sentenced to reiterate the capital's logic infinitely – in the process of production neither the capitalist nor the worker appear as living human beings (alienation).¹⁰

Such a self-mirroring structure has been many times described as the *modern* self-reflexive constitution of the subject. Within this logic nothing else than the subject can appear as the world because every object of consciousness inevitable turns into the object of self-consciousness and is therefore an object suppressed as object: the world that is given in its use value as a co-ordination, co-appearance of an object and consciousness, becomes the object of the subject – “this other [in our case: the world] is no longer an other but an object of a subject's representation.”¹¹ Such an alterity can only have an instrumental (sublatable) and not an ontological role because within this structure all that is extraneous turns out to possess a negative but specular identity with the representing subject who therefore only mirrors itself in the supposedly extraneous other.¹² There are, generally speaking, two mutations of such a mirroring structure that resist true alterity.

In the first scenario, the subjective situates itself against the world. The consciousness is isolated from the objective since both of them, as constituted and finished, resist each other. That which enables the presentation of the object to consciousness is what we can call, after Kant, the forming force of reason or transcendental imagination,¹³ which are categories empty of any content, categories as that which allow us to perceive an entity as a separate entity and not as just an aggregate of its sensible qualities (what Heidegger would call the “thingness of the thing”). Yet such a presentation called “presence” is already a *figure produced by the subjective* because these categories, i.e., what allows the subject to perceive something as present, the means by which subjectivity installs its object as present to subjectivity, are necessarily the

¹⁰ Leszek Kołakowski, *Główne nurty marksizmu* (Warszawa: Krag-Pokolenie, 1989), p. 239.

¹¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. P. Connor, trans. P. Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 24. The remaining part of the essay is heavily indebted to this book.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

¹³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. C. Fynsk (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 70.

product of the subjective. The present object of consciousness is necessarily ideal, since, in order to appear in consciousness (in order to present itself), it has to be rid of all empirical diversity. In such a way, the subjective installs *itself* and becomes its own producer: there is a double mirror within the subject in which the subject reflects itself as reflection. Ultimately, and paradoxically, it is the mirror that produces everything including the mirror itself and what is presented as the world is nothing other than the specular image of the subjective.

For Hegel, subjectivity and objectivity are both moments of the same totality that develops itself as the process of its own understanding. Before the subjective and the objective get separated in the movement of dialectics they already belong to each other; they are the same “before“ they are different. This intricacy has its source in the nature of the real where what is objective (e.g. being) has its subjective moment and what is subjective (e.g. thought) lays claims to objectivity.

The existing thing is bound to possess qualities. It has to be determinate if it is qualitatively distinct from another being. A quality, as excluding other qualities is a limitation and therefore a negation. But since every quality is what it is only in relation to other qualities, the thing exists in the wholeness of relations with other things. Such an existence, the existence in the sphere of “otherness,” is called by Hegel “being-for-other” (*Anderssein*). But the thing is not only formed from the outside, it is not only the aggregation of relations and qualities; it also exists as this something that makes it this very thing, “being-in-itself” (*Ansichsein*). These two moments cannot be separated for the obvious reason that one enables another.¹⁴

What makes being-in-itself possible is that the thing permanently relates to itself.¹⁵ Being-in-itself is an intro-flected being, a being that has returned to itself from being-for-other.¹⁶ Intro-flection, however, has always been perceived as a subjective quality.¹⁷ Yet, the dialectic of the thing has also a third “side.”

Determinate being is more than the flux of changing qualities. Something preserves itself throughout this flux, something that passes into other things, but also stands against them as a being for itself. This something can exist only as the product of a process through which it integrates its otherness with its own proper being. Hegel says that its existence comes about through “the negation of the negation.” The first negation is the otherness in which it turns, and the second is the incorporation of this other into its own self.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), p. 120.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120.

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–133.

Such a process, which Hegel calls “mediation,” creates another subjective moment, since it presents things as, to a certain extent, controlling their development. But, there is a reason that explains why the objective possesses some qualities of the subjective. The reason is simple: in the Hegelian system, reality is the *notion*.

For Hegel, the opposition of Being and Nothingness is a metaphysical fallacy. Since everything in the world is created and then destroyed, the only truth that resides in the real is the truth of becoming.¹⁹ Because being and nothingness are one, everything in the world carries in itself their togetherness. That means that every being exists only insofar as it is its own contradiction; being contradictory, it is inclusive of its own negation. To maintain its truth, the thing has to become what it is not and, in order to do that, it has to leave its particularity behind. Thus the truth of something particular exceeds its particularity and, by relation with other things, becomes “a totality of conflicting relations.”²⁰ Therefore the truth of the real can only be universal. This truth is expressed in the *notion* (*Begriff*).

To common sense, what exists is particular (this was the earliest pre-Socratic intuition) and what is universal is “just” thought. As such it has the status of only the “second-rate” existence or the semblance of existence proper. This way thought becomes only an indifferent *form* that lacks substantial links with its particular content. Hegel opposes this view,²¹ for him, the universal – and the universal can only be present to thought – not only exists but is also more *real* than the particular:

The indispensable foundation, the notion, the universal which is the thought itself [...] cannot be regarded as *only* an independent form attached to a content. But these thoughts of everything natural and spiritual, even the substantial *content*, still contain a variety of determinatenesses and are still charged with the difference of a soul and a body, of the notion and a relative reality; the profounder basis is the soul itself, the pure Notion which is the very heart of things, their simple life-pulse, even of the subjective thinking of them.²²

Since the notion exists only for thought²³ and, at the same time, is also the “pulse” of reality, the objective world is the “result” of some absolute thought that thinks itself. (Hegel calls this thought the Absolute Idea.) This way subjectivity finds itself as being realised in objectivity. It also means that the object

¹⁹ Hegel's *Science of Logic*, pp. 82–83.

²⁰ Marcuse, p. 124.

²¹ Hegel's *Science of Logic*, pp. 35–36.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

is never exterior to thought; they are always already in some kind of concord because the dialectics is not only a method in the sense of an instrument that is applied from the outside, “a means standing on the subjective side by which this side relates itself to the object,”²⁴ but is also, and at the same time the “*substantiality of things*,”²⁵ i.e. the very way the thing exists, develops itself, and is its aforementioned truth.

But in such a system the other gets lost again. Hegelian reality is a *totality* which is a system of relations in which the interval between the same and the other has only a temporary (although necessary) existence before the two terms get adequated within a larger totalisation. Because the same depends on the other to seize itself, such an other becomes only a moment of the same. This process poses the other as the guarantee of the totality: negation is always *pure*, which means that there is no *absolute* Other within the system, there is only *nothing* which is a pure abstraction and this purity is precisely what enables it to disappear only to come back on a higher level of totality. Negativity is only “that same” whose sole purpose is the return to “this same” vanishing completely on the way.²⁶

Both of the above ways in which subjectivity relates to the objective end in the final analysis with the subject that projects its own image on the world and taking its projection as the world itself. As we have already noticed, in similar ways the capital turns everything (including identity/subjects) into its exchange value which in fact is no feature of the object but the capital’s specular reflection in everything it encounters and the reason it cannot encounter anything else than itself. What is more, within such an understanding, both the subject and the capital are *infinite*. This does not mean that the subject or the capital are immortal but that they cannot be outside themselves: their limit does not concern them, it simply surrounds them.²⁷

In all the above senses the capital and the (post?)modern identity constitute parallel if not identical structures as it had been the case throughout the modern era, and so it is quite difficult to understand the repeatedly proclaimed diagnoses of the death of ideology. When it is claimed that the postmodern subject is a radically desubstantialised formation, a purely functional space of the turnover of intensities which displays no stability, no substance, and which is pure *jouissance* (that such a structure is neither a substantial phenomenon nor a project in which the identity is understood as a task in the process of being accomplished), such *jouissance* is in no position to escape the logic we have

²⁴ Ibid., p. 827.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 826.

²⁶ Joseph Liberton, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), p. 30.

²⁷ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 27.

pursued so far, since that instantaneous *jouissance* or a series of unrelated intensities is precisely the place/moment where the subject's self-presence of itself is constituted.²⁸ The subject of *jouissance*, although it is neither a Cartesian substantial subject nor an existential project in accomplishment, is nevertheless the subject of *desire* which, although it will never fill up the lack it is (it is "sentenced" to desire), represents itself as essentially consisting of such a lack. (This is the postmodern theory itself: the new identity is essentially the lack of identity.) Such a subject has to be understood as a work. Although this work is not worked up along a pre-established teleological trajectory (substance), although it is not even the work in the process of working up its trajectory and goal (project), it is nevertheless a work whose essence is the very working up of itself and which identifies/represents itself as such. This returns us to the logic of the capital again: it has no other aim than working up of itself (accumulation); the riches are, in a sense, only a by-product of capital's work; the capital goes nowhere and when its work ceases it wastes away immediately. And it is not true that *jouissance* is modelled on the notion of abandon and expenditure while the capital is a product of the sparing economy – as we have already noticed, the quicker and bigger accumulation, the quicker and bigger spending (hence the infinite necessity of ever increasing accumulation).

From the above one thing is clear: identity is inextricably connected with the classical notion of the subject in all its incarnations because what is called identity is, as its very name says, the way the subject identifies itself, i.e. represents itself for itself. Such a representation cannot avoid a very simple logic: because the subject as subject is the master of its projections, the identity will always be something over which a subject exercises complete control but which is at the same time in complete control of the subject since it is its own mirror image. In this sense identity always is property (something that the subject has) but at the same time the subject itself is the property, its own property, since it can only be itself by possessing itself in its self-representation. Therefore, in the final analysis, the subject/identity is always a thing: something that is possessed and possessable. *Identity equals property.*

Is there then any escape from that logic which always turns out to be representing the being that is dead and by that means an immortal monad? Maybe the first move should be the clearing of the field and getting rid of the dead matter that has been persistently superimposed on the singular being as its very ownmost advantage, what is added to this being as a certain quality or the surplus which is produced by self-representation, i.e., the identity itself. What will be able to take the place of identity, what will not be the identity of a thing, and therefore a non-identity, cannot start with the individual as defined by its self-knowledge, and therefore property. The non-identity, or what

²⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

one would rather call *impropriety* (not *proprius*, not one's own, but also not suitable because not following suit, and therefore unbecoming, even indecent) can only begin with *relation*, which is prior to knowledge, also self-knowledge, since no knowledge exists in a pure state, but it is always articulated in a certain language and is therefore a communicative or communal phenomenon.²⁹ Thus, otherwise than identity-property which starts with a certain addition, impropriety starts with a subtraction: the subtraction of identity-property. But what is such a subtracted being if it is anything? Yes, properly speaking it is nothing (it is not something) but it is a nothing that is *shared*, by which the singular beings are related: it is the sharing of the lack of identity.³⁰ Yet this lack of identity is not a higher form of "substance" in which the beings can recognise themselves and with this their essence (something we have already encountered in the notion of *jouissance*). Although lack of identity is not necessarily something that implies relation, rather the opposite as it is clear from the examples of mental disturbances (a person whose identity collapsed tends to become a monad), there is a lack of identity that we can recognise as being shared by all of us: this is our condition of being mortal beings. Our finitude is something that we share, death is common to us all. *But what brings us together also keeps us apart*: I cannot recognise my death in the death of the other, since my death is my "ownmost possibility" that cannot be reappropriated through the other.

No one can take the Other's dying away from him. Of course someone can "go to his death for another." But that always means to sacrifice oneself for the Other "in some definite affair." Such "dying for" can never signify that the Other has thus had his death taken away in even the slightest degree. Dying is something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself at the time. By its very essence, death is in every case mine, insofar as it "is" at all. And indeed death signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being in which the very Being of one's own Dasein is at issue. In dying, it is shown that mineness and existence are ontologically constitutive for death.³¹

According to Heidegger, the only utterance in which *Dasein* finds *authentic* expression is: I am bound to die. Yet in this way my death becomes a work (in the sense of *jouissance*): although it is properly speaking nothing (it has no substantial identity), it semi-represents itself in the way I work myself towards my authentic existence. But death is precisely that which cannot be turned into a work as the identity to come – the work of death is what destroys

²⁹ Kołakowski, p. 132.

³⁰ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. xxxvii.

³¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. MacQuairre and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 284.

all identity.³² Moreover, for Heidegger, the consciousness of my finitude tears me away from being with others and throws me back at my selfhood: face to face with its own death *Dasein's* being-with (*Mitsein*) – supposedly constitutive of its mineness – becomes irrelevant.

Death is a possibility-of-Being which *Dasein* itself has to take over in every case. With death, *Dasein* stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. [...] If *Dasein* stands before itself as this possibility, it has been *fully* assigned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. When it stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other *Dasein* have been undone. This ownmost non-relational possibility is at the same time the uttermost one.³³

Such an existential solipsism³⁴ misses one important point however. Although it is true that I cannot recognise myself in the death of others and that their deaths do not create a homogenous *we* as: “we the mortal beings,” because death is not common to us all (your death is not mine, I can’t even imagine it along the same lines), and although my finitude is nothing (I cannot make a representation of it), yet it appears, but its appearance (which is not a representation) demands *relation* as its possibility: I experience my finitude in the finitude of the other which is not my finitude (I can represent the death of the other). So, to be more precise, one should say that finitude *co-appears*, since *the appearance of death is impossible without the other*.³⁵

In the light of the above we can return to some terms that are deemed to be new in the constitution of the postmodern identity. We have seen that understanding a new subjectivity as consisting of a series of temporary intensities which leads to the collapse of the hermeneutic depth, which in turn results in the superficiality and exhaustion of the postmodern culture, brings us back to the same problems we had encountered in the modern identity, so, in fact, there is no radical difference here. But maybe the terms that are used while describing a postmodern identity, can have a different meaning that would fit our improper terms?

Improperly is definitely not static: what we encounter here is not a question of a link or bond between the formerly constituted identities – communication or relation does not mean intersubjectivity.³⁶ Since relation is always anterior, the relationship between “you” and “I” is not a juxtaposition but exposition or, in other words, *ecstasy*,³⁷ where ecstasy does not mean the idiotic fascination

³² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 15.

³³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 294.

³⁴ Jean-François Courtine, “Voice of Conscience and Call of Being,” in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, p. 86.

³⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 28.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

of a monad with itself as spread out in an excessive number of images that approach the point of perceptive overload. Such a “postmodern” understanding of ecstasy always has to lead to the identity of the opposites that sooner or later will become one through sublation, and it does not really matter whether it is the consciousness that absorbs the outside images (the classical concept of the subject) or the outside images that absorb the consciousness (the postmodern concept of the subject). We have seen that in the final analysis, the difference is only superficial.

There is also another term, apart from ecstasy, that we can utilise as far as the discourse of impropriety is concerned. The postmodern subject is said to be *depthless* which, ultimately, is to lead to the abandonment of thinking, philosophy, etc. since if everything that there is to it is displayed on the surface of what is seen, the uncovering process, that is usually conceived as being identical to philosophy-hermeneutics, is spurious, because there is no hidden meaning beyond the surface nature of the image. Here again we are led into a kind of idiotic narcissism, which a postmodern identity is said to constitute. But, again, the idiocy is there only as long as we stick to a monadic notion of the subject. In that case, as we have seen, since all the objects are always the objects of the subject, the object is ultimately only an image in which a subject represents itself to itself. Such an image has no depth because in it the reason can see only what it has already invested there – this is the ultimate case of narcissism. Yet in the discourse of impropriety what is there in the first place is not an object, not a representation: first comes the sharing³⁸ (both dividing and having in common) of our finitude, our mortal bodies. As we have seen, the finitude is not an object (not an object of knowledge) because it cannot be reappropriated as a representation or a work. Where there is no object, also the subject is impossible (as a transcendental ground) and what is left is the *imageless body*, the body – my body – but, as in the case of my death, the body as given to me without becoming a thing I own, without being reappropriated through the representation that other bodies are for me.³⁹ Impropriety is also (if not first of all) my body but my body as a undifferentiated weight, mass; the body with no representation superimposed on it, the body without organs, if organs are functional parts of the whole.⁴⁰ One does not have a body, one is a body in the fullest possible sense of this word. Obviously such a body has no depth, because it does not provide any representation below which one can dive. What happens is actually the opposite: a naked body is precisely what

³⁸ Nancy’s term: *partage*.

³⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Corpus,” in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. B. Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 199.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 203. “Body without organs” is of course Antonin Artaud’s image (cf. 84, November 1947, p. 102).

appears (co-appears: without other bodies, which I can turn into representations, I would not be conscious of my own body) to reveal that “there is nothing to reveal, everything is there exposed.”⁴¹ The body does not hide anything; here “endlessly, the mass rises to the surface and peels off as surface”⁴² Improperly is precisely the place-moment where this peeling off, this exposure takes place. Therefore improperly is depthless, it is all surface, yet it does not mean that it is superficial. Moreover, improperly does not think, if thinking is conceived as the representing activity of reason. But doesn’t the improper way in which the body shares itself without becoming itself in representation (then there would be nothing to share) deserve to be called thought – not philosophy but fecund thought of the world in *praxis*? One may wonder if there is anything postmodern about it.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 205.

⁴² Ibid., p. 199.