

THE KNOWLEDGE OF PESSIMISM

Matko Krce-Ivančić

ABSTRACT: Leaving a well-trodden path of conflating pessimism with a favourite pastime of those who take pleasure in coming up with aporetic riddles, the article gives the knowledge of pessimism the attention it deserves. Pessimism endorses us to confront and express our existence without anxiously paying respect to the imperative of progress. The knowledge of pessimism is here for us to express rather than resolve our existence, thus claiming our freedom of thought. The article first outlines pessimism and its commitments. It then proceeds to propose the understanding of suffering as an underlying condition of our existence that allows the self to confront a discourse by which it has been constituted. Finally, showing that the imperative of progress is embedded in grant application forms, the article demonstrates one of the mechanisms by which the knowledge of pessimism is excluded from the contemporary university.

KEYWORDS: Anxiety; Existence; Freedom; Pessimism; Progress; Suffering

INTRODUCTION

In her seminal *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler takes up the question of agency. At the very beginning of her study, as a sort of methodological statement, she announces:

That agency is implicated in subordination is not the sign of a fatal self-contradiction at the core of the subject and, hence, further proof of its pernicious or obsolete character. But neither does it restore a pristine notion of the subject, derived from some classical liberal-humanist formulation, whose agency is always and only opposed to power. The first view characterizes politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism; the second, naive forms of political optimism. I hope to steer clear of both these alternatives.¹

So, in the first view, it could be said that the subject is seen as determined by

¹ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 17.
www.cosmosandhistory.org 471

discourse. In the second, on the contrary, it is assumed that the subject has nothing to do with power or, if we would like to use the vocabulary of discourse theory, that the subject is not constituted by discourse. We are dealing with the impotent subject in the first view, while the second assumes the omnipotent subject. Laying out the field of alternatives in this way, Butler aims to keep her distance not only from the Subject, as articulated in a classical liberal-humanist tradition, but also from the position on agency that characterises what she considers to be politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism. She leaves both of these extremes behind and proceeds to make it obvious that the subject is constituted rather than determined by discourse. Striking a balance between optimism and fatalism, Butler proposes a sophisticated perspective on agency.

Let us, however, take a step back and examine the layout of alternatives on conceptualising agency as proposed by Butler more closely. We are familiar with a classical liberal-humanist perspective on the Subject and its discontents. Indeed, we are aware not only of a critique of the Subject but also of a critique of the critique of the Subject, including a myriad of important and productive sub-sophistications in this respect.² But what is this position on the subject, situated by Butler on the other end of the spectrum, where the fact that agency is implicated in subordination is considered to be “the sign of a fatal self-contradiction at the core of the subject”?³ Butler acknowledges that her study is indebted to Foucault’s work on the subject and power as it is precisely in his work that “the formulation of the subject at issue resonates with a larger cultural and political predicament, namely, how to take an oppositional relation to power that is, admittedly, implicated in the very power one opposes.”⁴ Without any particular explanation, she frames this predicament as a “postliberatory insight” and, once she has acknowledged the relevance of Foucault’s conceptualisation of the subject for her own work on agency, is quick to add: “Often this postliberatory insight has led to the conclusion that all agency here meets its impasse. Either forms of capital or symbolic domination are held to be such that our acts are always already ‘domesticated’ in advance, or a set of generalized and timeless insights is

² For example, Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. B. Bosteels, London, Continuum, 2009; Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian subject: between language and jouissance*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995; Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London, Verso, 2000.

³ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 17.

⁴ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, pp. 16-17.

offered into the aporetic structure of all movements toward a future.”⁵ However, apart from these few sentences, Butler does not say much about this position. All we learn is that such a perspective is apparently quite self-content with announcing that our agency has met its impasse and ascribing the aporetic structure to our existence in general. She, nonetheless, briefly adds, sort of as a final disqualification, that this view on agency “characterizes politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism.”⁶ Compared to the position on agency that is derived from a classical liberal-humanist tradition, Butler does not attribute any tradition of thought to this fatalistic take on agency. It is just fleetingly introduced as an unfortunate result of drawing a politically sanctimonious conclusion from the postliberatory insight and then, on that very basis, dismissed. It did not get any serious consideration in her work and this despite the fact that, according to Butler, the postliberatory insight has often led to such a conclusion.

This article engages with the knowledge of pessimism, which is often considered to be behind or is conflated with the perspective on agency that has been swiftly dismissed above. Surely, when one gets involved with pessimism, a generous range of (dis)qualifications applies – fatalistic, politically sanctimonious, aporetic, leading to impasse, timeless, etc. – that are meant to serve as a clear sign that this line of reasoning is not something worth probing any further or, even more useless, pursuing. However, the article shows that the knowledge of pessimism is rather productive. First, I will introduce pessimism as a sort of alternative tradition of thought, thus making it clear that we have every reason to appreciate it for its commitments and no excuse for portraying it as an immature or sanctimonious reasoning. Second, the article will argue in favour of recognising suffering as a valuable source of knowledge. Suffering is seen as constitutive of our existence and not as a passing state of affairs. Third and finally, analysing the application form for a renowned research fellowship, I will exemplify the mechanisms of exclusion that the contemporary university has established to exclude the knowledge of pessimism while enforcing the promise of progress via research.

⁵ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 17.

⁶ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 17.

PESSIMISM AND ITS COMMITMENTS

Let us, however, briefly return to Foucault's so-called postliberatory insight and Butler's point that "often this postliberatory insight has led to the conclusion that all agency here meets its impasse."⁷ Foucault's discipline, namely the history of ideas, could be understood as a discipline that shows us an inherently transitory character of social phenomena. It does so by demonstrating that what seems to be a given has taken such an appearance as a result of various discourses sedimenting in a specific constellation over time. Our present has its own history and we might as well intervene in this constitutive process. The history of ideas aims to make this apparent in its analyses, as Foucault argues: "I do not conduct my analyses in order to say: this is how things are, look how trapped you are. I say certain things only to the extent to which I see them as capable of permitting the transformation of reality."⁸ On the other hand, Foucault's work in the history of ideas might as well be understood as what I would like to name "the history of a constant." While the transformation of reality is indeed always a possibility, and social phenomena are always "becoming," this is not to say that we live in a radically fluctuating universe of meaning. The technologies of power are fairly resilient to change, as Foucault was anxious to clarify: "I'd wish to say that it is quite true that the technologies of power can be transferred from one field to another during the course of history."⁹ What makes Foucault's approach so unique is that he is making it obvious that a particular idea which we might perceive as new has, in fact, been with us for quite some time. He is laying out the history of an idea, thus creating an opportunity for us to reconsider our present views.

This makes Foucault an unsettling figure as, reading his analyses, one can learn – and this is not always the most pleasant experience – the history of her own present. A very fine example is Foucault's analysis of psychiatric power that has not been particularly welcomed by the psychiatrists, as Foucault notes: "I recall those psychiatrists who, upon reading *The History of Madness* (which deals with arguments related to the eighteenth century), said: Foucault is attacking us. It wasn't my fault if they recognized themselves in what I wrote. This probably

⁷ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 17.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx. Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. J. Cascaito and R.J. Goldstein, New York, Semiotext(e), 1991, p. 174.

⁹ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, p. 170.

proves only that an entire series of things has not changed.”¹⁰ Those psychiatrists have recognised Foucault’s work on psychiatric power precisely for what it is, namely the history of their present, and they were not too happy to hear about this complex legacy that informs their current practice. In any case, a thorough self-reflection rarely induces happiness and, needless to say, Foucault’s aim was to create opportunities for us to think about our existence rather than to make a name for himself in the genre of feel-good theory.

Butler’s claim that Foucault’s postliberatory insight has often been interpreted as leading to impasse, I believe, has a lot to do with his ability to trace the history of a constant. However, Foucault’s capacity to show how things have remained the same is not in contradiction with his point that the present of social phenomena has its history and that our present could lead to many futures. To say that something has not changed, of course, is not to say that it cannot change. Or, in other words, to say that we have failed to use our agency to achieve social change is not to say that our agency has met its impasse. It is simply to fully acknowledge that we do not need to be determined by discourse for things not to change. While it is true “that agency is implicated in subordination is not the sign of a fatal self-contradiction at the core of the subject and, hence, further proof of its pernicious or obsolete character,”¹¹ it is also safe to say that being constituted by discourse has proven to be more than enough for things not to change. Foucault has made us painfully aware of this, rather empirical, point; the technologies of power have been quite resilient or, to make this formulation a bit less impersonal, our willingness to change the *status quo* has been quite miserable.

We feel and succumb to this demoralising state of affairs. One could hardly think of a better example of our resignation than the fact that, nowadays, we are embarrassed to even use the term “emancipation.” Instead, we discuss “agency” as if this notion – rather than being merely a euphemism for “emancipation” – has some profound meaning. “Agency,” let us admit to ourselves, is nothing but a resigned emancipation. Many other classical philosophical concepts have also given way to their euphemisms, e.g. “politics” has become “ethics,” which is indeed a failure to acknowledge what Zupančič considers to be

¹⁰ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, pp. 168-169.

¹¹ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 17.

an invaluable lesson: it is not these notions themselves that are problematic; what is problematic (in some ways of doing philosophy) is the disavowal or effacement of the inherent contradiction (or antagonism) they all imply, and are part of. That is why, by simply abandoning these notions, we are abandoning the battlefield, rather than winning any significant battles.¹²

Thus, we should not steer clear of stating the obvious; yes, our very own agency is implicated in our subordination and this is the contradiction at the core of the subject. It is most definitely not a fatal one, though being constituted by a hegemonic discourse that we are looking to dispense with *is* a contradictory state of affairs. This contradiction structures the reality of emancipation and, if we choose to gloss over it or obfuscate it by relying on various euphemisms, we are wasting a valuable opportunity to increase our understanding of what emancipation is.¹³ Pessimism has no problem with acknowledging and examining the inherent contradictions of our existence and it does so without succumbing to despair that a reflection on these might as well produce. Sticking at the battlefield of emancipation, pessimism allows us to take its contradictions on board, thus recognising not only the opportunities but also the limitations that these create for social change.

Considering contemporary political theory, one can hardly come across such an approach that would reflect what Butler considers to be politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism that stem from overemphasising the contradictory character of agency. Far more often can we find anxious attempts to avoid politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism which flirt with politically sanctimonious forms of optimism. The reason for this is simple; in order to avoid being accused of adopting a pessimistic position, it might seem advisable to err on the optimistic side. In the worst case scenario, you get accused of being an incurable optimist. What we lose with this safety-first approach is the understanding of our existence. What we get, as the article will show later on, is a type of research that promises “impact” and neatly fits the ideology of granting bodies.

¹² Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, London, MIT Press, 2017, p. 2.

¹³ For my work on one of the most influential models of emancipation in contemporary political theory as offered by Laclau and Mouffe, see Matko Krce-Ivančić, ‘Neoliberal subjectivity at the political frontier’, in G. Ferraro and M. Faustino (eds.), *The Late Foucault: Ethical and Political Questions*, London, Bloomsbury, 2020, pp. 197–212.

I claim that we should be bold enough to acknowledge, as Foucault did, “that an entire series of things has not changed”¹⁴ and persevere in exploring the consequences of this insight. It is not sufficient to declare that we are constituted by discourse and then swiftly proceed to chase yet another promise of progress. This is neither to celebrate politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism nor to neglect the importance of social change. However, it is to finally give attention to the states that characterise our existence and are not necessarily tied to a particular event, including the themes of anxiety, despair and suffering, while prioritising *understanding* over the imperative of progress via research. For this, I argue that we should engage with a tradition of thought that is often neglected and considered to be not serious enough, namely pessimism. In his book on pessimism, Dienstag argues that “the great divide in modern political theory is not between the English-speaking and the Continental schools, but between an optimism that has had representatives in both of these camps and a pessimism whose very existence those representatives have sought to suppress.”¹⁵ Examining the work of Rousseau, Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Freud, Camus, Unamuno, Cioran, Nietzsche and others, Dienstag demonstrates the tradition of pessimism and highlights its representatives. However, and far more importantly, he recognises the main tenet of pessimism:

there is a kind of pragmatism buried so deeply in Western philosophy that it is almost impossible to root out. This is the notion that there *must be* an answer to our fundamental questions, even if we have not found it yet, and that this answer will deliver us from suffering. That is, there must be a way for human beings to live free and happy. [...] To the pessimists, human existence is not a riddle waiting to be solved by philosophy; human existence merely is. Freedom and happiness do not exist as the solution to a problem.¹⁶

It is precisely due to such a worldview that pessimism has been heavily disputed. Pessimism does not buy into the idea of progress and for this it makes no excuses – a head-on collision with the Enlightenment, including its contemporary forms. This has been more than enough for it to be suppressed or, even worse, labelled as “not serious.” To suppress pessimism is to, at least,

¹⁴ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, p. 169.

¹⁵ Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: philosophy, ethic, spirit*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. xi.

¹⁶ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, pp. 34-35.

recognise it as deserving of serious consideration and dispute. On the other hand, to argue that pessimism is not serious enough is to frame it as a trivial pastime that has no place in Philosophy. More often than not, pessimism is understood as an adolescent period in one's philosophical interests that eventually, if our philosopher in embryo matures as it should be, gives way to the engagement with serious philosophy. "Serious," one should not be mistaken, here serves to denote a philosophy that is ready to propose a system, thus exerting a strong commitment to solving the riddle of human existence, to making us both free and happy.

Pessimism does not suffer from the delusions of grandeur as it is fully aware that there is no ultimate answer to our existence. In this manner, pessimism is also emancipating as "pessimism liberates us from this narrative of individual progress as it denies the larger narrative of historical progress. It may not assure happiness, but it relieves us from the unhappiness that optimism, quite unwittingly, generates and guarantees."¹⁷ The pessimist does not aim for happiness and there is a very insightful critique of optimism, more precisely its superegoic grip on us, arising from the tradition of pessimism. Pessimism is ready to grasp the unexpected consequences of our actions and is, at least in this respect, quite close to psychoanalysis.

Departing from Freud's analysis of anxiety, Lacan argued that anxiety denotes "the failing of the support that lack provides."¹⁸ In accordance, Dolar underscores that "the Lacanian account of anxiety differs sharply from other theories: [...] it is not the anxiety of losing something (the firm support, one's bearings, etc.) [...] What one loses with anxiety is precisely the loss – the loss that made it possible to deal with a coherent reality."¹⁹ The "lack," which in psychoanalysis stands for the inconsistency that is constitutive of the social, is precisely what neoliberal ideology denies. The neoliberal subject is not expected to "cover" the lack with desires and phantasies – this would, as psychoanalysis teaches us, be the case in the not-as-anxious course of events and is what would enable the subject to

¹⁷ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, p. 110.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X*, J. Miller (ed.), trans. A. R. Price, Cambridge, Polity, 2015, p. 53.

¹⁹ Mladen Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny', *October*, vol. 58, 1991, pp. 5-23, p. 13.

establish her symbolic co-ordinates – but to deny the lack’s constitutive dimension of the social altogether. The neoliberal subject, an entrepreneur of herself, is expected to render the social perfectly readable; her activity must know of no obstacles or contingencies that could get in her way to success. The paradox is that “we are trying to get rid of precisely the lack that marks the social. Contingency might appear as horrifying but, in the end, what really produces anxiety is the attempt to get rid of it.”²⁰ In the realm of pessimism, the narrative of individual progress is seen precisely for what it is, namely the Enlightenment mythology. For the pessimist, contingency is not to be avoided and attaining the highest of accolades, most certainly, is not one of her commitments. Thus, in a paradoxical turn of events, some unforeseen happiness might as well come the pessimist’s way.

However, we should bear in mind that the pessimist is not into making a conscious attempt to “trick” the neoliberal superego, thus maximising her happiness. In one of Leopardi’s essays, the Nature pronounces to the Soul: “Live: be great and unhappy,”²¹ thereby formulating what could be seen as the imperative of pessimism. This surely is not to struggle for happiness by foreseeing a myriad of obstacles that stand in our way to freedom. It is not to struggle for happiness in any way. Rather, it is to claim freedom to think about our existence as a fundamental and unalienable right, thereby breaking away from the neoliberal imperative to maximise our self-entrepreneurial capacities. If this means suffering – and, as the article argues, it most likely does – then that is perfectly fine with the pessimist. Pessimism, in any case, denounces the idea of reconciling both happiness and freedom in a perfectly balanced life. These two are, basically, mutually exclusive and, “for the pessimists, the more we strive to develop our (time-)conscious capacities, the more we will increase our discomfort in the world, the struggle for freedom must always have an ironic consequence for the goal of happiness.”²² Suffering is an unintentional consequence of taking our freedom seriously and it is quite a strong hint that we are on the right track.

²⁰ Renata Salecl, *On Anxiety*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 41. For my work on anxiety and neoliberalism, see Matko Krce-Ivančić, ‘Governing through anxiety’, *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2018, pp. 262–277.

²¹ Giacomo Leopardi, *Essays and Dialogues*, trans. C. Edwardes, London, Trübner & Co., 1882, p. 36.

²² Dienstag, *Pessimism*, p. 35.

Thus, the pessimist is committed to attaining an improved understanding of our existence even at the cost of her own happiness and, for this reason, one is doing a grave injustice to pessimism by portraying it as trivial or, in other words, uncommitted.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF SUFFERING

Pessimism, as I have mentioned above, is committed to voicing the states that mark our existence and are not closely tied to a specific context, for example anxiety, despair and suffering. This is still not a fatalist perspective on agency that Butler has in mind, where “a set of generalized and timeless insights is offered into the aporetic structure of all movements toward a future.”²³ To fully take into account that we are constituted by discourse and recognise, as Foucault did, “that an entire series of things has not changed,”²⁴ has nothing to do with offering timeless and universal insights. It is simply to refuse to offer all of our insights as inextricable from a particular point of time, thereby granting ourselves a liberty to see things clearly.

For example, looking at the coverage of the coronavirus outbreak, one could easily get the impression that if only this pandemic were to finally release us from its grip, our anxiety would go away. On its website, the National Health Service (NHS) England states: “The impact that the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is still having on our lives may cause us to feel anxious, stressed, worried, sad, bored, lonely or frustrated. [...] It’s important to remember it is OK to feel this way and that everyone reacts differently – for most of us, these difficult feelings will pass.”²⁵ As it often happens these days, *10 Tips To Help Manage Anxiety* are also provided and one is actually tempted to believe that these difficult feelings will pass for the most of us. The thing is, however, that there was no need for COVID-19(-20-21-?) to make us anxious and difficult feelings are not likely to pass for the most of us. Even if neoliberalism were to give way to a social system that is far more conducive to our mental health – and, indeed, it seems to be easier for us

²³ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 17.

²⁴ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, p. 169.

²⁵ NHS, *Worried About Coronavirus? 10 Tips To Help Manage Anxiety*, <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-anxiety-tips/>, 2021, accessed 16/02/2021.

to imagine the end of the world than a serious alternative to neoliberalism²⁶ – anxiety would stay with us.

This is by no means to downplay the anxiety that is exacerbated by COVID-19. It is, rather, to acknowledge the existence of what might as well be understood as an underlying anxiety. In this context, Cioran's words are illuminating:

There exists, I grant you, a clinical depression, upon which certain remedies occasionally have an effect; but there exists another kind, a melancholy underlying our very outbursts of gaiety and accompanying us everywhere, without leaving us *alone* for a single moment. And there is nothing that can rid us of this lethal omnipresence: the self forever confronting itself.²⁷

Thus, the anxiety which is closely tied to COVID-19 might as well pass for the most of us, however there exists another kind of suffering that is fuelled by a sort of underlying anxiety and this one will not leave us alone for a single moment. The self forever confronting itself is lethal for our happiness. However, as good luck would have it, happiness is anyway not the aim of pessimism and, if there is an author who has taken not pursuing happiness to its full extent, then that would be Emil Cioran. If we would like to be ironic, it could be said that Cioran took the first among the *Top tips to cope with anxiety* by the NHS with an absolute and lifelong dedication, that is “Understand your anxiety: Try keeping a diary of what you are doing and how you feel at different times to help identify what’s affecting you and what you need to take action on.”²⁸ The issue is that he arrived at the conclusion that our existence makes us anxious and that we need to take action on probing our existence as much as possible, even at the cost of coping with anxiety. For him, the self forever confronting itself is the self that is suffering from an underlying anxiety. This suffering is not only tormenting, as any suffering is, but it is also the most valuable source of knowledge. It is only through suffering that we obtain a more sophisticated understanding of our existence, in Cioran's words: “To suffer is to *produce* knowledge.”²⁹ The theme of suffering also

²⁶ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Ropley, Zero, 2009. As Fisher notes on p. 8., the phrase that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” is attributed to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek.

²⁷ Emil Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, trans. R. Howard, New York, Arcade, 2012, p. 110.

²⁸ NHS, *Feeling anxious?*, <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/anxiety/>, 2021, accessed 19/02/2021.

²⁹ Emil Cioran, *The new gods*, trans. R. Howard, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 81.

preoccupies Unamuno in his *Tragic Sense of Life*, where he argues that to suffer is to exist:

And how do we know that we exist if we do not suffer, little or much? How can we turn upon ourselves, acquire reflective consciousness, save by suffering? When we enjoy ourselves we forget ourselves, forget that we exist; we pass over into another, an alien being, we alienate ourselves. And we become centred in ourselves again, we return to ourselves, only by suffering.³⁰

The self forever confronting itself is the self that is confronting a discourse by which it has been constituted. By doing so it does not alienate itself, it does not lose itself in enjoyment and happiness. Quite on the contrary, it strives to emancipate itself by becoming its very own centre of focus. We return to ourselves or, in other words, we come into being only by suffering and, indeed, “he who has not suffered is not a *being*: at most, a creature.”³¹ This type of suffering – namely, suffering from existence for existence – is what allows us to understand our being. Learning from this, literally existential, suffering is *not* to withdraw from social life. That would simply not be enough, “it is not enough to withdraw from the mob, not enough to go to another place: we have to withdraw from such attributes of the mob as are within us. It is our own self we have to isolate and take back into possession.”³² To take your own self back into possession is to grant yourself freedom and lucidity of thought. For this reason, to those feeling the toll of confronting their existence, Cioran commands: “Get hold of yourself, be confident once more, don’t forget that it is not given to just anyone to have idolized discouragement without succumbing to it.”³³ Pessimism, therefore, is not a view characterised by politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism. While capitulation does not produce knowledge, confronting and expressing our existence surely does. One is, after all, always free to confront oneself and pessimism is here to remind us of our inalienable freedom to suffer. To learn from instead of succumbing to this suffering inducing freedom is most probably the sincerest political act there is.

³⁰ Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. C. Fitch, New York, Dover, 2016, p. 140.

³¹ Emil Cioran, *Drawn and Quartered*, trans. R. Howard, New York, Arcade, 2012, p. 81.

³² Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (ed.), London, Penguin, 2003, pp. 268-269.

³³ Cioran, *Drawn and Quartered*, p. 66.

OPTIMISM GRANTED

The ideology of granting bodies, however, is not in favour of such “gloomy” topics as suffering from our very own being. Grants are provided for a fairly different type of research. In this respect, *Guide for Applicants* that aims to assist the candidates with completing the grant application form for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Individual Fellowships, which are widely considered to be among the most prestigious research fellowships nowadays, is illustrative. The potential applicant is expected to promise the impact and is advised:

Describe how the new knowledge generated by the action will be disseminated and exploited, and what the potential impact is expected to be. Discuss the strategy for targeting peers and key stakeholders (such as the scientific community, industry, professional organisations, policy makers, etc.). Also describe potential commercialisation, if applicable, and how intellectual property rights will be dealt with, where relevant.³⁴

Now, as it is declared at the beginning of the guide, “action refers to the individual research project proposed for funding.”³⁵ I guess that the word “action” is introduced as a sort of managerial pledge that the individual research project will deliver a result.³⁶ In any case, the researcher is asked to propose the action that achieves the impact. The expected impact, let us be clear, is a narrow category. You cannot propose a strategy that would promote the self that is confronting a discourse by which it has been constituted. The action cannot “simply” dedicate itself to increasing the understanding of our existence. The scientific community is in a completely different business, where the important factors are policy makers, potential commercialisation and intellectual property rights.

Grant application forms are, literally, politically sanctimonious forms of optimism and what they aim to deliver is the promise of progress via research. The prospective applicant must identify a certain social phenomenon or, even better, a particular event and then proceed with the research while not deviating much from this time-bound object of research. Inevitably, this means the proliferation of false bottoms triggered by the requirement to make our interests

³⁴ European Commission, *Guide for Applicants. H2020 Programme*, <https://bit.ly/3uuBY3D>, 2020, accessed 25/02/2021, p. 38.

³⁵ European Commission, *Guide for Applicants*, p. 3.

³⁶ The guide, however, still refers to “researcher” instead of, for example, “Action Man.”

manageable. The COVID-19 anxiety, for example, could be a promising and insightful project choice. However, for the project to tick all the boxes it would need to steer clear of a more existential aspect of anxiety and suffering. The applicant should maintain a limited research scope and, in any case, keep a safe distance from the realm of pessimism. It is highly likely that such a project would eventually give up the concept of anxiety and adopt “stress” instead. It is a far more measurable and one-dimensional category than anxiety, so you can put it in a survey, etc.³⁷ In this way, research questions get their answers and these serve as a basis for generating the impact. When it comes to those research questions considering our existence more broadly construed, there are no answers, “moreover, what answers could there be? Had there been one, we should know it, to the great detriment of the enthusiast of stupor.”³⁸ The scientific community, industry, professional organisations and policy makers – or, in the language of granting bodies, “key stakeholders” – would not really have any interest in a project examining a sort of anxiety that is constitutive of our existence. You simply cannot make a mental health policy out of it and the project would surely bring into question the very idea of progress via research. The funded research is expected to be positive and, what is crucial to ensure this, predictable.

In this spirit, the potential applicants for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowships are asked to organise their proposed research in terms of deliverables and milestones. Both terms are, of course, industriously explained in the guide: “a deliverable is a distinct output of the action, meaningful in terms of the action’s overall objectives” and “milestones are control points in the action that help to chart progress. Milestones may correspond to the completion of a key deliverable, allowing the next phase of the work to begin. They may also be needed at intermediary points so that, if problems have arisen, corrective measures can be taken.”³⁹ However, it is not enough to establish deliverables and milestones, “additionally, a Gantt chart must be included in the text.”⁴⁰ The Gantt chart is a well-known management tool and, in this context, it is used to lay out the

³⁷ For my work on the radical empiricism of present-day academia, see Matko Krce-Ivančić, ‘In the aftermath of the radical empiricist onslaught’, *Critical Horizons*, 2021 [forthcoming].

³⁸ Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, p. xi.

³⁹ European Commission, *Guide for Applicants*, p. 40. On this page, one may also see an example Gantt chart.

⁴⁰ European Commission, *Guide for Applicants*, p. 39.

proposed work plan in a colourful but very detailed table. And, as if this is not already more than plenty to warrant predictability of the project, the applicant is also asked to ensure “appropriateness of the management structure and procedures, including risk management.”⁴¹ It is safe to say that the funded project will most definitely not surprise us in any way and, if it still somehow does, corrective measures can be taken.

In *The Burnout Society*, Han noticed that “in the course of general acceleration and hyperactivity we are also losing the capacity for rage [...] Rage is the capacity to interrupt a given state and *make a new state begin*. Today it is yielding more and more to offense or annoyance [*Ärgernis*], ‘having a beef,’ which proves incapable of effecting decisive change.”⁴² The grant application form forces the vigour of thought – and, yes, this includes rage – into the Gantt chart, where it is safely neutralised. The road to progress, as the guide makes it apparent, is paved with milestones. Thus, if it turns out that your approach requires a decisive change to be productive, the agreed management structure is here to redirect you towards reaching your neatly scheduled milestones. Not even a proper annoyance is left to remind us that we exist.

We most certainly need effective forms of control over academic work, however what we largely waste with this type of research management is an immense vitality that new ideas have and their potential to attract people and influence their opinions. Despite this being its ultimate rationale, the aforementioned way to manage research is not here to ensure that those who pay for it – taxpayers, to be more precise – will get their value for money. The general public is meant to be engaged by so-called outreach activities, while “the type of outreach activities could range from an Internet presence, press articles and participating in European Researchers’ Night events to presenting science, research and innovation activities to citizens.”⁴³ Can anyone say with a straight face that “researchers’ speed dating,” “science slams” or “copycatting the image of Marie Skłodowska-Curie,” offered as a part of European Researchers’ Night, are a meaningful way to gain attention of those in the general public who are

⁴¹ European Commission, *Guide for Applicants*, p. 41.

⁴² Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. E. Butler, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015, pp. 22-23.

⁴³ European Commission, *Guide for Applicants*, p. 39.

looking to think about their existence in a critical fashion.⁴⁴ These are nothing but cringeworthy and vain attempts at saving a symbolic authority of science.

Simply, once you put a perfectly good idea in a grant application form, it ends up sterilised and, to be frank, boring. If continental theory had been constricted to such a form since its earlier days, hardly any of its classics would see the light of day. This applies in particular to pessimism, where reducing the scope of thinking – and this as much as the illusion of progress and manageability of society requires – is out of question. To repeat Foucault's words once again, and this is indeed apparent to all of us, “the technologies of power can be transferred from one field to another during the course of history [...] an entire series of things has not changed.”⁴⁵ We should really cease to pretend that we wake up every day next to a radically different universe waiting for us to squeeze it in a grant application form. If it is the vital aim of research to express our existence and engage the general public, then pessimism should not to be excluded by the very forms that are supposed to grant the freedom of thought. However, at least for the time being, we have the reign of boredom, namely the hegemony of funding bodies that grant managerial optimism which barely even bothers to hide its cynicism. Politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism, to be sure.

CONCLUSION

The article underscored the knowledge of pessimism. If we bother to look beyond the attributes by which it is usually discredited, such as fatalistic, politically sanctimonious, aporetic and so on, we see nothing but a commitment to lucidity. Pessimism, quite simply, is dedicated to expressing our existence and it does so regardless of how this fares with the story of progress:

If we see things black, it is because we weigh them in the dark, because thoughts are generally the fruit of sleeplessness, consequently of darkness. They cannot adapt

⁴⁴ European Commission, *European Researchers' Night*, https://ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/actions/european-researchers-night_en, 2021, accessed 03/03/2021 and European Commission, *Science is the Captain*, <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/055373>, 2020, accessed 03/03/2021. Just to mention that the overall budget for the project *Science is the Captain*, with “the ambition to bring truly European style of celebrating science in the Eastern frontier of the European continent,” is €197500. The captain Science spares no expense in its colonial voyage which is – to make things even more sad – conducted by the institutions located “in the Eastern frontier,” a phantasmatic space of the European continent *par excellence*.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, pp. 169-170.

to life because they have not been thought *with a view* to life. The notion of the consequences they might involve doesn't even occur to the mind. We are beyond all human calculation, beyond any notion of salvation or perdition, of being or non-being, we are in a particular silence, a superior modality of the void.⁴⁶

Thus, pessimism does not aim to be positive or, in actual fact, negative. Thinking with a view to salvation is to embark on an eschatological mission that skews our understanding of existence. Pessimism asks us to think beyond such calculations and with a view to lucidity. Lucidity does not deliver us from false consciousness. Every consciousness is a false consciousness, including the lucid one. It simply enacts us to ask ourselves does a particular insight express our existence precisely or not. If it does, and that is what counts, then it is perfectly irrelevant whether it is negative or positive. The pessimist dares to say what she sees in front of her nose. To disregard the notion of the consequences and to claim our right to express rather than resolve our existence *is* to take a stand.

Thacker is perfectly right: "Pessimism is the most indefensible of philosophies. It speaks, but has no right to an audience. In the court of philosophy, it has committed perjury simply by taking the stand."⁴⁷ Today, pessimism is nipped at the bud by the ideology of granting bodies. What we are left with, when thought is managed in this way, is research that is funded in order to make an impact or, in other words, to promise at least a bit of progress. We are left with the theology of micro-salvation via science. However, as it lacks any substance, we should not take this hegemony of positivity too seriously. After all, you know how it is with the eternal sunshine of the positive mind. It is safe, predictable and very profitable for its heralds, to be sure, but that is just about it. On the other hand, pessimism might as well be like anxiety. The more we try to dispense with it, the more it seizes us. In particular, this is so in the COVID-19 era, where the issues of suffering, anxiety and despair have gained in relevance. In the realm of pessimism, these have been studied for quite some time and are seen as underlying conditions that characterise our existence. Pessimism is also here for us to realise, or when we realise, that there is no answer to our existence and that, in all honesty, "the idea of progress dishonors the intellect."⁴⁸ As is surely

⁴⁶ Emil Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. R. Howard, New York, Arcade, 2012, p. 116.

⁴⁷ Eugene Thacker, *Infinite Resignation*, London, Repeater, 2018, p. 38.

⁴⁸ Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 117.

already happening, those who are interested in critical thinking will ultimately find their way to pessimism and its insights. It is, nonetheless, unfortunate that the knowledge of pessimism and its further production is mostly filtered out by grant application forms. We could make a far stronger contribution to understanding our existence with the resources that are currently available for social sciences and humanities.

Ultimately, the label “pessimism” is not important. What is worth revisiting are insights that nowadays happen to be largely dismissed under the common denominator “pessimism.” When the label “pessimism” is mentioned, Thacker’s ironic account comes to mind:

Shouldn’t there be, for example, a pessimism of race or gender, a political or economic or historical pessimism? Absolutely. In fact, I dream of an indo-pessimism, a sino-pessimism, an afro-pessimism, a gyno-pessimism, a queer pessimism, a techno-pessimism, an eco-pessimism... I suddenly feel quite generous, as if pessimism belongs to everyone, simply by virtue of undergoing the burden of being...⁴⁹

Relying on the burden of being as the most valuable epistemological resource is to experience, in Cioran’s words, “a superior modality of the void.”⁵⁰ The void is not a system. Insights formulated with a view to lucidity do not order a system of thought. There is no and I believe there should be no system that is specific to pessimism. Indeed, “the worst form of despotism is the *system*, in philosophy and in everything”⁵¹ and we should not think with a view to system. It is no wonder that the most insightful work in the “discipline” of thought is to be found in the “form” of epigrams or fragments.⁵² Simply, “the epigrams constitute a sequence of perplexities – in them we shall find interrogations but no answers”⁵³ and the vigour of fragments, precisely as they are widely considered not to be a serious way to do Philosophy, is not exhausted by the scrutiny of Philosophy. Of course, not thinking with a view to system is to risk losing the protection of its church,

⁴⁹ Thacker, *Infinite Resignation*, p. 251.

⁵⁰ Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 116.

⁵¹ Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 117.

⁵² For example, see Emil Cioran, *All Gall Is Divided*, trans. R. Howard, New York, Arcade, 2019; Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*. Cioran exercised an immense creativity in his aphorisms. Without any doubt, his work is a prime example of thinking beyond the academic form of philosophy.

⁵³ Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, p. xi.

namely the university. But then again, you know how it usually goes with the universities, “they admit no one that refuses to shut up and be quiet. There is such thing as a pre-established harmony between the fate of universities and the course of history.”⁵⁴ After all, as pessimism teaches us, we should not bother with a balanced life. Happiness and lucidity rarely go hand in hand. Good news is that there is no course of history, and neither is there the course of individual progress, so we can never know how things will pan out in the end. The universe does not grant us anything and, in this light, pessimism does not promise us happiness but it endorses us to grant ourselves the freedom to reflect upon our existence. The knowledge of pessimism allows us to claim the burden of *being*.

matko.krce@gmail.com

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Badiou, Alain, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. B. Bosteels, London, Continuum, 2009.
- Butler, Judith, *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Cioran, Emil, *All Gall Is Divided*, trans. R. Howard, New York, Arcade, 2019.
- Cioran, Emil, *The new gods*, trans. R. Howard, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Cioran, Emil, *Anathemas and Admirations*, trans. R. Howard, New York, Arcade, 2012.
- Cioran, Emil, *Drawn and Quartered*, trans. R. Howard, New York, Arcade, 2012.
- Cioran, Emil, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. R. Howard, New York, Arcade, 2012.
- Dienstag, Joshua Foa, *Pessimism: philosophy, ethic, spirit*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Dolar, Mladen, “‘I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny”, *October*, vol. 58, 1991, pp. 5-23.
- European Commission, *European Researchers’ Night*, https://ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/actions/european-researchers-night_en, 2021, accessed 03/03/2021.
- European Commission, *Guide for Applicants. H2020 Programme*, <https://bit.ly/>

⁵⁴ Max Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline. Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, trans. M. Shaw, New York, Seabury, 1978, p. 218. It is very interesting to see the evolution of Horkheimer’s notes. His early notes come with the title *Dawn* and, following his disappointment with things in general, he had chosen to give his late notes a telling title: *Decline*. Lucidity shines through his *Decline*, reminding us that we should not waste our disappointments.

- [3uuBY3D](#), 2020, accessed 25/02/2021.
- European Commission, *Science is the Captain*, <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/955373>, 2020, accessed 03/03/2021.
- Fink, Bruce, *The Lacanian subject: between language and jouissance*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Ropley, Zero, 2009.
- Foucault, Michel, *Remarks on Marx. Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. J. Cascaito and R. J. Goldstein, New York, Semiotext(e), 1991.
- Han, Byung-Chul, *The Burnout Society*, trans. E. Butler, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Horkheimer, Max, *Dawn & Decline. Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, trans. M. Shaw, New York, Seabury, 1978.
- Krce-Ivančić, Matko, 'In the aftermath of the radical empiricist onslaught', *Critical Horizons*, 2021 [forthcoming]
- Krce-Ivančić, Matko, 'Neoliberal subjectivity at the political frontier', in G. Ferraro and M. Faustino (eds.), *The Late Foucault: Ethical and Political Questions*, London, Bloomsbury, 2020, pp. 197–212.
- Krce-Ivančić, Matko, 'Governing through anxiety', *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2018, pp. 262–277.
- Lacan, Jacques, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X*, J. Miller (ed.), trans. A. R. Price, Cambridge, Polity, 2015.
- Leopardi, Giacomo, *Essays and Dialogues*, trans. C. Edwardes, London, Trübner & Co., 1882.
- Montaigne, Michel de, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (ed.), London, Penguin, 2003.
- NHS, *Feeling anxious?*, <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/anxiety/>, 2021, accessed 19/02/2021.
- NHS, *Worried About Coronavirus? 10 Tips To Help Manage Anxiety*, <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-anxiety-tips/>, 2021, accessed 16/02/2021.
- Salecl, Renata, *On Anxiety*, London, Routledge, 2004.
- Thacker, Eugene, *Infinite Resignation*, London, Repeater, 2018.
- Unamuno, Miguel de, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. C. Fitch, New York, Dover, 2016.
- Zupančič, Alenka, *What Is Sex?*, London, MIT Press, 2017.
- Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London, Verso, 2000.