

"OTHERED" EXISTENCE.  
THOUGHTS ON SØREN KIERKEGAARD,  
GEORG SIMMEL AND EMMANUEL LEVINAS'  
*DIACHRONY AND REPRESENTATION* (1982)  
IN A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This essay deals with Levinas' interpretation of what it means to exist *othered* – that is, to live a life in the wake of the other's effacement. The author compares the notion of othered existence with Søren Kierkegaard's and Georg Simmel's "existential" thinking on the one hand and with Michael Theunissens' concept of a reifying and alienating *Veränderung* on the other hand in order to put forward the question what is at stake in an inevitably *othered* existence that proves from the start to be inspired by an original *othering* and suffers time and again from violent *otherings* which we inflict on each other.

**Keywords:** existence, othering, subjectivization, violence.

"I welcome every philosophy of  
existence that leaves open the door  
leading to otherness; but I know none  
that opens it far enough".

*Martin Buber*<sup>2</sup>

I

In our everyday life we usually take it for granted that everybody is a distinct human being that differs from others and, therefore, can be distinguished in comparison with them. Moreover, we take it for granted that everybody attaches more or less great importance to his/her own being-different (being other than others). In this way, we presuppose a notion of *comparative difference* which implies that we are or want to be different from others – in comparison with them, even if we bear no comparison with them when they seem to be different beyond all comparison...

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<sup>2</sup> M. Buber: *Philosophical Interrogations*, ed. Sydney and Beatrice Rome, New York: Rinehart and Winston 1964, 22 f.; cf. P. Mendes-Flohr: Jewish Co-Existentialism. Being with the Other, in: J. Judaken, R. Bernasconi (eds): *Situating Existentialism*, New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press 2012, 237–255.

Georg Simmel referred to this notion of comparative difference in his theoretical sociology where he described the sociality of human beings as originating from a fundamental sensitivity to difference (*Unterschiedsempfindlichkeit*).<sup>3</sup> We are deeply concerned with our difference *vis-à-vis* others, he speculated, precisely because we *are not* simply different but, rather, have to maintain our individuality by way of permanent differentiation. When this effort grows weak or deteriorates, our difference from others runs the risk of fading away – up to a point where we appear to be so much like others that we finally may become indistinguishable. According to Simmel, we *are* not simply others in contrast to others but, rather, we must be concerned about our own otherness inasmuch as it can only be secured by processes of differentiation that establish, maintain and defend differences which are never simply “there” or “given”. Being afraid of becoming indistinguishable, we may therefore resort to *making* ourselves and others *others*, that is, to “other” ourselves and them at all costs.

But, you may ask, should we be at all afraid of losing our individuality (which I take here as referring to our comparative and distinguishable difference with respect to others)? Aren’t we individual human beings willy-nilly and inevitably? It was primarily<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard who sought to teach everybody this lesson: nobody is a more or less trivial, exchangeable member of the human species, a mere individuation of the human race or an example of the same genus; and we are not united by resemblance or common nature.<sup>5</sup> Rather, and paradoxically, *everybody is unique* in his/her own life. Everybody is in that sense “different” (if she or he only realizes this). And it is this inevitable and inalienable uniqueness that we share as human beings. Seemingly, this ontological mark of distinction needs no reference to comparative difference.<sup>6</sup> Everybody seems to be, in the very facticity (to borrow a term from Heidegger<sup>7</sup>) of his or her existence, an *individual* and ultimately a *unique self* that is primarily, if not exclusively, related to itself.

<sup>3</sup> G. Simmel: *Soziologie*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1992, 657, 684; cf. B. Liebsch: *Zerbrechliche Lebensformen. Widerstreit – Differenz – Gewalt*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 2001, ch. 9: 5.

<sup>4</sup> There were, to be sure, “precursors” of Kierkegaard in this respect – such as F.D.E. Schleiermacher who cannot be taken into account here.

<sup>5</sup> A thought that was later radicalised by Levinas: The others with whom I am obsessed in the other do not affect me as united with my neighbour by membership in a common genus. The others concern me from the very beginning. Here fraternity precedes the commonness of a genus. My relationship with the other as neighbour gives meaning to my relations with all others. Cf. E. Levinas: *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Dordrecht: Springer 1991, 159. In contrast to Kierkegaard, for Levinas it is the proximity of the other (who always remains distant, but can confront us in the face of any other) that “unites” us.

<sup>6</sup> S. Kierkegaard: *Abschließende unwissenschaftliche Nachschrift zu den philosophischen Brocken*, Bd. 2, Gütersloh: Mohn 1989, 239 (= *Samlede Vaerker Bd. VII*, 461).

<sup>7</sup> T. Kiesel: *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1995.

One may “forget” this, however, and lose sight of what it means to be an individual. It is well known that Kierkegaard accused modern societies of dissolving any true acknowledgement of what it means to be an individual. Through its production of the false idol of “the public”, he lamented, they divert attention away from our individuality to a mass public that loses itself in the productions of the media and in the consumption of things which keep our individuality distracted in the sphere of “superficiality” (*Äußerlichkeit*). Nevertheless, Kierkegaard insisted, we are individual selves who are related to themselves in a singular, “incomparable” way. To “forget” this cannot amount to an ontological mutation which would make a sort of selfless thing out of us. The recovery of a true self that has been hitherto forgotten always remains possible. The self may become altered and estranged in manifold ways. Its alteration (*Veränderung*), however, is in Kierkegaard’s perspective never irreversible.

For Kierkegaard a striving *to other* oneself or others seems to make no sense. Everybody should take care of him- or herself in order to become a true self that deserves the name. And to secure one’s true self no reference to others is necessary<sup>8</sup> – with the exception of the absolute other (God<sup>9</sup>) and his commandments (love your neighbour as you love yourself<sup>10</sup>). In our normal everyday social life the experience of *being othered* (or *to other oneself* in order to become like others...) implies for Kierkegaard only a dangerous distraction from the true relation of the self to itself – from which he wanted to erase any irritating comparative otherness insofar as it entices us to fix our attention on a permanent striving for *distinction from others*.<sup>11</sup>

To be *othered* or to experience *othering* (*verändert sein* or *Veränderung erfahren*) means here: to be threatened by an alteration that seems to make *something* or *someone* else out of us. In this double sense the German Kierkegaard-expert Michael Theunissen coined the term *Veränderung*. Someone undergoes a *reifying othering* when he or she becomes *something* else. In contrast, *Veränderung* as *personalized othering* implies becoming like *an other* – with the possible consequence that

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, “being unreservedly oneself can be preserved [if we follow Kierkegaard] at the cost of sociality”, comments T. Eagleton: *Trouble with Strangers. A Study of Ethics*, Chichester: Wiley & Sons 2009, 167.

<sup>9</sup> J. Habermas: *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1988, 33, 203.

<sup>10</sup> An interesting implication of Kierkegaard’s downplaying of the significance of the other for the self is his description of self-love and loving the neighbour as fundamentally one and the same thing. Cf. S. Kierkegaard: *Works of Love, Kierkegaard’s Writings, XVI*, ed. and transl. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Barnes & Noble 1998, 22–24.

<sup>11</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy\\_of\\_S%C3%B8ren\\_Kierkegaard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_of_S%C3%B8ren_Kierkegaard). In contrast to my interpretation, we read here that in *Johannes Climacus* (in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*) the facticity of individual subjects refers to “what is personal to the individual – what makes the individual who he is in distinction from others”.

one seems to live like others (for example in a community that forges its members into a seemingly homogenous collectivity).<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, in both cases *othering* that produces an *othered* self has a pejorative meaning: the self is imagined as becoming someone or something other *which it is not* and *which it in truth can never become*. Consequently, when we have gone through *othering* we should do our best (in a Kierkegaardian perspective) to reverse this process in order to undo it and ultimately to rid ourselves of an otherness that was imposed on us and threatens us with estrangement in experiences of reification or alienation.

Fascinating as it may be, Kierkegaard's critique of any form of *othering* is ultimately not convincing insofar as the self depends on its own testimony, which must be credible and must therefore be addressed to others.<sup>13</sup> The image of a self that retreats from any social relation in which it could fall prey to a reifying or alienating *othering* contradicts any possibility of attestation of a self that desires to find its credibility proven. Does it follow from this that *comparative existence reigns over us* and that we cannot escape from being *othered* by others who in turn must face the experience of being *othered* by us?

This seems indeed to follow from the most prominent current usage of the notion *othering* in (postcolonial) cultural criticism, which at first glance is a far cry from Simmel, Kierkegaard and Theunissen's social ontology. According to an already widespread understanding, *othering* means primarily a process that *identifies others* who are deemed to be *different* (in a negative sense) from oneself, from the social unit one belongs to or from what is regarded as the mainstream. This process can work as a rhetorical device in which one group is seen as "us" and another group as "them" so that positions of domination and subordination are reinforced and reproduced. In this sense the "othering" of blackness is commonplace.<sup>14</sup> Numerous minority populations suffer time and again from *othering* in this sense<sup>15</sup> that is *inflicted* on them with discriminatory consequences. To *other* others (for example disabled people), then, means to disregard, to devaluate or to discredit them.<sup>16</sup> In postcolonial theory (often with reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak<sup>17</sup>) the notion

<sup>12</sup> M. Theunissen: *Der Andere. Studien zur Sozialontologie der Gegenwart* [1965], Berlin: de Gruyter 1977, 84.

<sup>13</sup> I have shown this elsewhere; cf. B. Liebsch: *Prekäre Selbst-Bezeugung. Die erschütterte Wer-Frage im Horizont der Moderne*, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2012.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.wordnik.com/words/othering>.

<sup>15</sup> Even the American President Barack Obama is an object of *othering* (by so-called "birthers" – questioning President Obama's country of birth – who claim that "there's just no way this Obama guy is one of us").

<sup>16</sup> Prominent examples demonstrate that *othering* reaches beyond defining the self as superior and the other as inferior insofar as it may provide a rationale to justify killing others (native Indians for example), taking their land and enslaving them. See <http://socialscielite.blogspot.de/2009/08/politics-of-othering.html>.

<sup>17</sup> In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak describes the process through which a "colonial subject" (the "unnamed subject of the Other of Europe") is

of *othering* referred to colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from an imperial centre and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by an imperial subject that has (allegedly) the power to “construct” others *as others* so that they have no alternative but to internalise the *othered* image of their existence.

In a more radical sense *othering* not only identifies and discriminates others (who are supposed to be already there) but *makes* them others or *creates* them as such. Their very otherness, then, seems to be a product of a social “technique” of *othering*. In this more radical sense of the term, *othering* does not only amount to an *othered* image of others but, rather, to a construction of their existence *as others* who consequently seem to be radically dependent on the subjects who *othered* them.

Construction, however, is not tantamount to fabrication. The other must somehow always already be there so that in relation to him or to her a construction can operate that may construe him or her *differently* and *other* him or her in that sense. Therefore, *othering* must presuppose others to whom this process can relate. Otherwise *othering* would produce a completely fictional otherness. *Othering*, seen that way, is not a radical construction of otherness out of nothing but, rather, a process of perceiving, interpreting and treating others in ways that give them the impression of becoming (or being made) *other than they feel or claim to be*. In this sense *othering* seems to be unavoidable in relation to everybody we happen to come across. There are only some others who are selectively *othered* others in the aforementioned sense. These are others who realize that they are *othered* in a pejorative sense and who often find themselves *othered* as another group to whose perceived weakness, defects and faults others point to make themselves look stronger or better. In relations to *othered* others differences are emphasized while similarities are hidden – eventually up to a point where one seems to have little or nothing in common any more with discriminated others.

In recent contributions to on-going debates about *othering* we read that unfortunately “we cannot get away from the concept of the other, as it is too crucial for an understanding of the self. What we can do, though, is to limit the ways in which we group people up and construct them as something entirely different from an imagined ‘us’. The power of definition is a strong one, and when used in the context of othering, it continues to reinforce discrimination.”<sup>18</sup> This quotation makes two presuppositions quite clear that come into play where the politically dangerous consequences of *othering* are considered: (i) everybody is an *other* to others; (ii) everybody may therefore become the target of processes of

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placed in the position of other who then becomes appropriated by assimilation. Spivak insists on intellectual’s complicity in the persistent constitution of others as their own self’s shadow. See G. Spivak: Can the subaltern speak? In: C. Nelson, L. Grossberg (eds): *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education 1988, 271–313.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the introductory Essay ‘*The Other*’ and ‘*Othering*’ by S.R. Engelund, see <http://newnarratives.wordpress.com/issue-2-the-other/other-and-othering-2/>

forced *othering* that make her or him even *more* an other to others – with discriminatory, disparaging and even radically demeaning consequences that may eventually amount to a strict exclusion of totally *othered* others.

To be sure, such extreme consequences are not regularly the outcome of practices of *othering*. It seems, however, that nothing more is required than to be an *other* to others in order possibly to become the victim of radical *othering*. Seen that way, *othering* plays on the register of *Veränderung* in Theunissen's sense. This means that *othering* subdues the uniqueness and singularity of the self and threatens to make *someone else* or even *something other* out of it. Thus, this process appears to be a form of violence that we should try to resist as far as possible.

Insofar, however, as we cannot “renounce” our sociality altogether and retreat into a purely private (or “idiotic”) life, we are doomed to *other* others and to be ourselves subjects and objects of processes of *othering*. The only alternative we really have seems to be to look for at least *less* violent if not *non-violent* forms of *othering* that take into account whether or not others can live with them, acknowledge, accept and recognize them. Does this consideration lead us back to well-known forms of dialectical relations between the self and the other? Do we have to accept Hegel's famous description of the struggle for recognition as it was outlined in his *System der Sittlichkeit* and in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* as the normative yardstick of any adequate description of these relations?<sup>19</sup>

Without doubt, Kierkegaard would have objected to this contention. He maintained that the unique, singular self cannot and should not rest on any *othering* that would conjure up the danger of a reification and/or alienation in the social world of comparative existence.<sup>20</sup> We exist – if we take him seriously in this respect – as unique and singular selves on our own account and at our own risk – under the “vertical” super-vision of an absolute other, to be sure, who was *othered* by human beings and who in turn *others* us without any regard to the “horizontal” otherness of others. Apart from this radical *othering* – paradoxically *vis-à-vis* an other who never makes himself visible and refuses to turn up in any way<sup>21</sup> – the self must not regard itself as necessarily *othered*. In a Kierkegaardian perspective *othering* is restricted to a *contingent effect of our exposition to the view and judgment of others who do not contribute essentially to our being (as others in relation to other others)*.

The situation changes dramatically when we take into account Levinas' critique of Hegel and Kierkegaard in his radical revision of modern social philosophy. Levinas rejects the model of the struggle for recognition that proceeds via the negativity of reciprocal *othering* (on

<sup>19</sup> R. Bernasconi: Levinas face to face – with Hegel, in: *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 13, 1982, 3: 267–276; B. Keintzel, B. Liebisch (eds): *Hegel und Levinas*, Freiburg i. Br., München: Alber 2010.

<sup>20</sup> K. Löwith: *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, Hamburg: Meiner 1986, 127 ff. Löwith points to the apparent paradox that everybody should (in Kierkegaard's perspective) count as an “exception”.

<sup>21</sup> J. Starobinski: *Das Leben der Augen*, Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Wien: Ullstein 1984.

the one hand) *and*, at the same time, Kierkegaard's restriction of the self to a form of unique existence (on the other hand) that seems to be entirely unrelated to any *othering* – insofar at least as it does not depend on any this-worldly other in order to become a true self. On the contrary, if we believe Kierkegaard, it must seek to fend off any reference to others that would imply reification and/or alienation of the self.

By way of his critique of Hegel and Kierkegaard, Levinas discovered another possibility of combining *othering* and existence. Instead of opposing the uniqueness of every individual human being to any *othering* whatsoever and instead of handing the self over without reserve to reifying or alienating dialectical processes of reciprocal *othering* he drew attention to an “*always already*” *othered sense of human existence*. According to Levinas, human life in its very singularity does not owe this sense to its striving to become true in the fight for recognition, but to the *gift of inspiration* by the other (who can be *any* other). Levinas does not take recourse to a vertical, absolute otherness in order to demonstrate this inspiration. As a social philosopher he insisted on the necessity and possibility of *showing* how such an inspiration can and *must* affect us in our relation to the other.<sup>22</sup> The other, indeed any other, “gives” us responsibility for himself – whether we like it or not, Levinas claims. Therefore, the gift of responsibility has always already affected us and inspires us – even before we can try to refuse it. Whether or not this can be demonstrated with a phenomenological or any other method, however, seems to be questionable – even for Levinas himself. – Before I elaborate this point a little more, I should like to state briefly in what respect this new conception of a radical *othering* of human existence deviates from the course of the aforementioned authors.

Levinas reads Kierkegaard with Heidegger's eyes, as it were. That means primarily that he refuses to understand the existence of a unique self on the basis of the ontology of on-handness (*Vorhandenheit*<sup>23</sup>). Instead, he adopts from Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* the *transitive* notion of existence which means that we exist in our lives in a temporal form. The temporality of human existence, however, does not of itself reveal that it is basically concerned about itself. For Levinas the ontological notion of self-care cannot do justice to the temporality of human existence. Instead, he maintains, human existence discloses in its temporality its openness to the other who can never be re-presented. That the other is experienced as an *other* means precisely that he escapes any presentation and re-presentation.<sup>24</sup> The self always already comes too late to get hold of the other. This does not mean that the other, who seems to have irrevocably retreated in his diachrony, cannot affect us. On the contrary, claims Levinas, it is the other in his non-(re-)presentable and neverthe-

<sup>22</sup> Even if that relation turns out to be a “relation without relation”; see E. Levinas: *Totality and Infinity*, transl. A. Lingis, Duquesne: Duquesne University Press 1969, 295.

<sup>23</sup> I draw here on T. Kiesel's translation of Heidegger's term *Vorhandenheit*.

<sup>24</sup> P. Ricœur: *Main Trends in Philosophy*, New York, London: Holmes & Meier 1979, 371.

less non-indifferent diachrony that inspires us. Precisely because he cannot be fully grasped by way of perception, cognition and recognition he disquiets us. His non-representable diachrony does not indicate a defect of our capacity to synchronize everything that we experience in our present. Rather, it indicates, in a *non-privative* sense, that the temporality of our being-present can never be self-sufficient and that it is exposed to a radical otherness that resists any sublation in human existence. At this point Levinas parts company with ontology<sup>25</sup> and paves the way for a radically new ethics which pretends to describe human existence as *othered* from the start.

To the extent that he refers to the human self at all (in a sense that is comparable to Kierkegaard's notion)<sup>26</sup>, Levinas only takes it as a starting point from which we must "ask back" in order to discover the trace of an original *othering* that seems to be inscribed in its very being from the beginning. Only belatedly can we ask where that *othering* originates – if not only by way of "different" others who try to *other* us.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to an attribution of *othering* to external others Levinas insists that we *exist*<sup>28</sup> a life (each of us in a *singular* way so that we come together in a *multiple existing*) that proves to be open (and vulnerable) *vis-à-vis* an otherness that *others* our existence in a radical sense from within. The other is always already "there" when we relate to him – even when we try to restrict our life to our own allegedly incomparable uniqueness. This means delimitating the borders of a self, retreating into a privatized form of life that in the end may try to cut any relation with a social world that threatens it with processes of reification and alienation. In this point, Levinas neither follows Kierkegaard nor resorts to Hegel. Rather, he dissociates himself from Kierkegaard and Hegel at the same time in describing human existence as *in itself*, internally, always already *othered*. Consequently, in his view there is no way out into a self that could rid itself from any reifying and/or alienating *othering*. The self, rather, proves, in its very existence, to be always already and in an inalienable sense *othered*.

On the other hand, *othering* in Levinas' understanding is not the product of efforts of others *to make* someone, an individual self, a whole group of people, a class or a race, others in a sense that the specific objects of such an "attack" might possibly experience as forced, offensive or violent. Rather, the original *othering* that Levinas discovered in the "happening" (*Geschehen, Ereignis*) of human existence turns out to

<sup>25</sup> R. Bernasconi: No Exit: Levinas' Aporetic Account of Transcendence, in: *Research in Phenomenology*, 2005, 35: 101–117.

<sup>26</sup> Levinas primarily criticized the category of *sameness* – which he never distinguished from the *self* in a clear-cut way.

<sup>27</sup> P. Ricoeur: *Autrement. Lecture d'Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence d'Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris: PUF 1997. Ricoeur sympathizes with Levinas' search for a "vraie altérité, avant l'altérité de l'autrui dans l'approche et la proximité" (p. 8). He is afraid, however, that Levinas' anti-ontological thinking in the end leaves his ethics without any adequate language.

<sup>28</sup> Levinas uses this term in a *transitive* sense and is here close to Heidegger in this respect.

be a *pathological event* (*Widerfahrnis*) in the Aristotelian sense of *pathos*. This original *othering* happens to us in our very *passivity* – which does not mean that we are merely causally affected by the otherness of the other as if we were mere objects (*verändert* in Theunissen's sense). Rather, our passive being-affected by the otherness of the other calls for our understanding (if only belatedly) of what it means, in what respect it challenges us and how we can or should pick it up.

In the second part of my presentation I shall try to elaborate this consideration in more detail. In order to do this, I come back to Levinas' handling of phenomenology, especially to those of his writings that cast doubt on whether it can adequately take the diachrony of the other into account. Levinas expected phenomenologists to do this, but his lifelong dealing with phenomenological methods ultimately led him to realize their limits with respect to the otherness of the other. In turn, he insisted in such a rigorous manner on this notion that he provoked the suspicion that he advocates a *theological turn* of phenomenology that ultimately jeopardizes the whole endeavour of a social ontology which claims adequately to describe human relations as forms of *othering*.<sup>29</sup>

## II<sup>30</sup>

The experience of being exposed to the face of the other leads to the kernel of what Derrida called Levinas' "ethics of ethics". He claims that we find in this experience – beneath the surface of moral claims, judgments and justifications, of utilitarian justice, ethos and virtues, deep beneath even the *forum internum* of our conscience – the source of an absolute responsibility for the other which no excuse can relativize. To be under the other's eyes exposes us to the imperative of being responsible for him, a responsibility which allows no exception or substitution of ourselves as responsible beings. It is I who am required not to let him die alone, to care for him, to share... Levinas' key concept for what forces us to respond responsibly to the other is "impossible indifference". The face of the other places us before the demand to be responsible, that is, to affirm the demand as that which subjectivizes us as moral subjects. Whether it is the face of the other and our perceiving it or, inversely, our experience of being seen by the other – in any case we should expect that in Levinas' philosophy a phenomenology of perception takes a central place. This is, however, not the case.

In Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, perceiving and the awareness of being perceived by others were described as modalities of experience, which pretends to offer us a world of objects under our con-

<sup>29</sup> D. Janicaud et al.: *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"*. *The French Debate*, New York: Fordham University Press 2000.

<sup>30</sup> This second part of my considerations was first presented under the title "Presence and taking leave of the other. Remarks on Levinas' ethical criticism of phenomenology" during the 19th international conference of the North-American Merleau-Ponty-Circle, Berry College, Rome/USA, 22 September 1994. I am grateful for Michael Smith's helpful comments on the paper.

trol. Nothing in perception seems to contradict this pretension, Levinas says. A phenomenology of the other-as-experienced will, therefore, never be able to uncover the imperative otherness of the other which subjectivizes experience itself and thus makes the responsible subject vulnerable through its being exposed to the demand of the other. Despite his well-known minute discussions of the phenomenological notions of intentionality, sensation, representation etc., Levinas' final judgment about phenomenology as a philosophy which is bound to the realm of experience appears to be clear-cut.

Phenomenology, he maintains, clings ontologically to the concept of a *conatus essendi*, that is, to a heathen type of existence to which the silent language and priority of the other's face as demanding responsibility remains alien. The other's alterity, which ethically subjectivizes our experience, is itself not subject to experience, Levinas claims. If this were the case, he continues, the *radical* alterity of the other, his otherness, could no longer be taken account of. In Levinas' opinion, the ethics of a vulnerable subject, which realizes the impossibility of being indifferent in being exposed to the otherness of the other, cannot be founded on a phenomenological basis alone. *Prima facie*, therefore, Levinas' humanism of the other seems to transcend phenomenology altogether without regret – at least insofar as phenomenology appears to preclude taking into account the absolute otherness of the other. Levinas expressly maintains that phenomenology clings to a notion of vision which amounts to an intelligibility of the other in terms of “a donation of alterity within presence”. This intelligibility signifies, thus, “the reduction of the other [autre] to the Same, synchrony as *being* in its egological gathering”<sup>31</sup>

Levinas' long-lasting and thoroughgoing interest especially in Husserl's phenomenology of passivity and intentionality<sup>32</sup> as well as his reinterpretation of the phenomenological notion of the openness of experience did not prevent him from this rather definite conclusion, which bears destructive implications, especially for the phenomenology of time. To be sure, Levinas was ready to acknowledge that his concept of passion is itself rooted in Husserl's uncovering of a primordial life which affects experience without depending on the previous consent of an intentional subject. Nevertheless, for Levinas this primordial life remains imprisoned in its own “re-presenting” structures. The other will always be the anticipated other or the remembered other. This also holds true at the most elementary levels of passive synthesis, of protention and retention, where the immediate present transcends and extends it-

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<sup>31</sup> E. Levinas: Diachrony and representation [1982], in: *Time and the Other* (and additional essays), transl. R.A. Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1987, 99.

<sup>32</sup> Which already began, as is well known, in the late twenties of the last century with his *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (1930) and with his translation (together with M. Pfeiffer) of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*.

self towards the past and the future.<sup>33</sup> Wherever experience allows the other to appear, it will be under the conditions of the present, that is, under the conditions of re-presenting time. Levinas, however, maintains the radical incommensurability of the alterity of the other on one hand and the other-as-remembered and the other-as-anticipated on the other hand. By definition, the other as radically other cannot appear in the order of experience. The other-as-experienced has always already lost his radical alterity.<sup>34</sup>

While there is an immanent and constant transcendence of experiences and expectations towards the future, “presentational” time cannot transcend itself towards the time of the other. Put somewhat differently: if there is such a transcendence towards the time of the other, it is not a transcendence by way of experience and its temporality: it is, rather, the movement by which re-presenting experience, life and time themselves are to be regarded as transcended.

Levinas leaves no doubt that the notion of transcendence should not be understood here as signifying a secondary movement which opens re-presenting time towards the other. On the contrary, this notion is intended to signify a primary exposure of a respondent to the other which, by way of his power of subjectivization, calls the respondent into being.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the *subject-as-respondent* appears to be the answer which is given to the other who has always already been there and passed by. This “always already” refers to a time which must be absolutely different from linear, historical and cosmological time, in which anything now past must have been present some time ago. In contrast, Levinas repeatedly and vigorously maintains that the time of the other, his “authentic” time, has never been present and will never be present. The other’s homeland is not cosmological time and human history, which reduces us to mundane events, mere temporal things. As part of the cosmological and historical order, the other would never be able to keep the reserve of his otherness. Therefore, for Levinas any idea of a history of the other must be misleading.<sup>36</sup>

Levinas makes us believe that the notion of an anterior past which has never before been present marks the precise point where we have to leave the phenomenology of time behind us in order to be able to

<sup>33</sup> In the following discussion, I shall use the notion of “re-presenting” without discriminating primary and secondary remembering (or anticipation). Furthermore, I shall bracket the ontological question whether any re-presenting consciousness must be founded on the “presentifying” structure of being. (“Presentifying” is T. Kiesiel’s translation for Heidegger’s “Gegenwärtigung” as opposed to “Vergegenwärtigung”.) Cf. C. Malabou, J. Derrida: *Counterpaths*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004, 61, 133.

<sup>34</sup> E. Levinas: *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Paris: Vrin 1982, 234 f.

<sup>35</sup> “The alterity of the other person to an ego is first ... the face of the other person obligating the ego, which, from the first – without deliberation – is responsive to the Other”; see: Levinas, *Diachrony and Representation*, op. cit., 105.

<sup>36</sup> Cf., however, my evaluation of this consequence in: *Geschichte und Überleben angesichts des Anderen. Levinas’ Kritik der Geschichte*, in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 44, 1995/6, 3: 389–406.

take the alterity of the other into account. While Merleau-Ponty's late ontology of raw being as well as his aestesiological descriptions of *chair*, *chiasma* and *intercorporité* are obviously present in Levinas' work<sup>37</sup>, nowhere do we find special attention being paid to the internal development of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and ontology of time and historicity. This fact is all the more striking as it was, ironically, Merleau-Ponty who first drew our attention to the notion of a past which never before was present<sup>38</sup>, whereas Levinas claims that the phenomenology of time is unable to account for such a past, that is, the "diachronic" time of the other, the *refugium* of his authentic otherness. Several times Levinas extends this criticism expressly to the notion of *histoire fondamentale*, which he attributes to Merleau-Ponty.<sup>39</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's accounting for the limits of philosophical methods of reflection convinced him of a delay (*Nachträglichkeit*) with regard to primordial life which could never be overcome. I think however, Merleau-Ponty would not have gone so far as to claim an absolute pastness of the past which has never before been present. On the contrary, he insisted on an inherent relatedness of that which appears to be irreversibly withdrawn into the past on one hand and the posteriority on the other hand which gives us, paradoxically, access to that which has deprived us of a synthetic presence. In contrast, Levinas seems to be willing to claim an unconditional pastness of the past which has never been present in order strictly to avoid any contamination of the time of the other with an all-encompassing present.

Synchronizing presence, as the realm of existence and of any primordial subjective life, cannot be allowed to extend into the diachrony of the time of the other – not even in terms of a posterior presenting which would let him appear on the horizon of a delayed, remembering present. If we could ascribe to a remembering relation to the other the competence to recall him – despite his being always already retired into the past – then, nothing would force us eventually to get outside the prison which is the presence of our life. Presence is in Levinas' eyes the ontological fate of the subject and subjective primordial life; it is the fate to cling to itself; it is our fate to be condemned to seek to return to ourselves, no matter what we have lived through. This ontological script seems, once and for all, to have been written *apriori*.

In spite of his rigorous claim that the time of the other will forever resist primary and secondary remembering and that narrativity and historiography will forever remain blind with respect to diachrony, Levinas gives us, perhaps unwillingly, several indications of the necessity of steering a third way. With respect to diachronic time, Levinas speaks, for

<sup>37</sup> E. Levinas: De l'intersubjectivité, in: O. Höffe, R. Imbach (eds) *Paradigmes de Théologie philosophique*, Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse 1983, 181–186.

<sup>38</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. C. Smith, London: Routledge 1962, Part II, ch. I, § 13.

<sup>39</sup> As far as I can see, this notion cannot, however, be found in Merleau-Ponty's writings, even not in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the book which Levinas obviously had in mind.

example, of a movement of intense yearning which does not force us to seek fulfilment, assimilation or alleviation of the pain we feel in view of the absent other. On the contrary, Levinas praises our longing for what we are deprived of, a longing that gains in intensity all the more in view of the irrevocable absence of the other. Is it merely an accident that Levinas often alludes to the experience of taking leave of someone, of *Abschiednehmen*, saying *adieu*, which calls to our minds the fact that any separation, any sorrow, will at one time be final? Without a doubt, Levinas did not have the psychoanalytic conception of *Trauerarbeit* in mind, that is, the psycho-economy of the work of mourning which, ultimately, on the libidinal plane literates the survivor from the unique human being whom he has lost. Rather, Levinas speaks of an *adieu* which deepens our relation to the other, the departed, who remains radically separated from us in spite of our desperate attempts to “keep him in mind”. Needless to say, that Levinas’ *adieu* is neither that of a speech-act nor the event in historical time which expresses our politeness in railway-stations and airports. Moreover, Levinas does not discuss an ontological notion of *Abschiedlichkeit* as an existential dimension of the process of existence.<sup>40</sup>

In *Totalité et infinie*, however, we find the son, who is the authentic future of his father, described as being lost in time, as forsaken, and as realizing his loneliness in an *Abschied* through which he dedicates his life as the survivor to the man he survived. The dedication of the son to the immemorial past into which the father has retired will not absolve the son – in spite of his inevitable affirmation that the father is forever lost – so that the separation must be accepted as a radical one. In order to be able to think the *Abschied* or *adieu*, we have to elaborate the notion of a relating back which does not annihilate the distance, deny the separation, or annul the absence – if only through remembering. We need such a notion of relating, says Levinas, which confirms what is lost as lost without synchronizing it in our presence. The trace of the other, he maintains, is exactly this notion.<sup>41</sup>

To be sure, the trace of the other is neither like a physiological engram nor like a historical datum, a retrograde signification which contributes to our knowledge and judgments about the past. The trace is neither a simple effect like a scratch or a footprint nor a residual sign which refers to former times. While the sign offers itself for retrograde interpretations in terms of narrative history, the authentic trace, that is, the trace of the other, disturbs the order of presence and re-presentation. Nevertheless, says Levinas, the trace is the presence of that which has never been present and remains forever past, whereas the signification and indication of historical traces only refer us to a past which in every case corresponds to a former presence. Now Levinas carefully seeks to avoid having this duality result in a dualism. The trace of the other is ambiguous enough to appear sometimes as a sign which refers

<sup>40</sup> An elaboration of this concept can be found in the author’s *Geschichte im Zeichen des Abschieds*, München: Fink 1996.

<sup>41</sup> E. Levinas: *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris: Vrin (4ème éd.), 1982, 187–202.

to his life as a historical being. However, “before” the trace signifies as a sign, Levinas insists, the face of the other bears the trace of the emptiness of his irrevocable absence as absolutely other. The trace-sign signifies as the trace of a trace which disturbs our presence by way of this irrevocable absence. In order to choose a metaphor (which Levinas might regard as misleading in this context, because it entices us to reactualize an ontology which he tried to surpass), the historical trace is the *Gestalt* which we “see” against the invisible background of the otherness of the other which can never directly appear as a phenomenon in our presence. Without the *Gestalt* of the significative or at least indicative trace, this background would be reduced literally to nothing. Where the concrete, historical traces fade away, our realization of being exposed to the otherness of the other must be seriously weakened. As a consequence, the otherness of the other would have to dissociate itself from any relation to its absolute past. That we are, at least in Levinas’ radical ethical perspective, hostages of the other would, then, appear to be only the reverse of our complete historical ignorance with respect to this “fact”.

On the other hand, where we feel content with a positivistic notion of empirical traces, where we hypostatize, in other words, a “historicity of death”, to quote Merleau-Ponty<sup>42</sup>, we forget the other as other altogether in order to reduce his life to a mundane thing, that is, to material for a necrology. Thus, paradoxically, it appears to be the *excess of the trace of the other as the surplus and invisible horizon of empirical historical traces of other human beings which allows the historical trace to play its genuine role*. Inversely, moreover, it is the historical trace which allows the trace of the other to affect us without becoming a mysterious intrusion of an alien, anonymous god.

Note that the horizon which burdens and enriches the historical traces of other human beings with the surplus of the otherness of the other must be thought of as exceeding the order of presence and visibility of the other itself. Thus, we do not have to do here with a contingent invisibility within visibility but, rather, with a transcendence of the visibility of the present other towards his radical otherness which will never become visible solely in terms of historical traces.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty coined this term in his essay *Le langage indirecte et les voix du silence*. Cf. *Signes*, Paris: Gallimard 1960, 49–104.

<sup>43</sup> As long as we maintain a juxtaposition of empirical traces and the “authentic trace” of the other, however, the transcendence of visibility cannot be regarded as resulting in an absolute transcendence and absolute invisibility. For his part, Merleau-Ponty denies an absolute invisible altogether in order to reveal the invisibility which is inherent in “raw being”. Thus, he declares, the invisible “is not a *de facto* invisible, like an object hidden behind another, and not an absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather, it is the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being.” Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty: *The visible and the Invisible*, transl. A. Lingis, ed. C. Lefort, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1968, 151. Obviously, Merleau-Ponty was not willing to admit the notion of an invisibility beyond being.

With respect to a reinterpretation of the necessarily inherent relatedness of the trace of the other and historical traces, the thought of the late Merleau-Ponty can be our guide. It ought to be remembered that it was his late ontology which led us to decisive insights into “irrevocable absences” as inevitable temporal shadows of our experience, of any primordial life, which, thereby, was set out as being vulnerable through processes of *Entgegenwärtigung* (de-presenting).<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere I have shown that the pastness which is responsible for this de-presenting, never appears before a *Gestalt* emerges; on the contrary, its background comes into play only later as the past from which the *Gestalt* emerged. At least this comes close to Levinas’ thought, namely, that this past seems never before to have been present and always already retired into the immemorial.

Could this not serve as a model for what Levinas describes as the enigma of a trace which proves the infinity of the otherness of the other without allowing him to appear? Can we maintain, in other words, that there is no re-presenting (*Gegenwärtigung*) without a correlative, invisible background of a radical de-presenting (*Entgegenwärtigung*) – just as there is no trace of the other in our presence without an irrevocable past which affects us through an enigmatic retreat of the other into a past which never promises to offer itself to a later present, a past, which had always already passed by and away? Levinas would probably raise objections, especially to the ontological cast of this question. He would insist, I suspect, that the absolute past into which the other retired does not depend in any way on a previous presence which would suffer only from a secondary de-presenting even if this de-presenting finally seems to lead into a pastness which was never and will never be present.

Where presence comes first, Levinas maintains, non-indifference surrenders to the conditions of the *being* of presence<sup>45</sup>, whereas the absolute temporal exteriority of the other in truth exposes our presence to an unconditional vulnerability, that is, to the non-indifference of our responsibility for the other. Levinas would also object that what is truly lacking in phenomenology is not the *surplus* pertaining to a being which opens itself to ever renewed horizons of experience, but “the *better* of the proximity” of the other who *others* our existence and makes it vulnerable from the start.<sup>46</sup> Proximity, however, turns up as absolute remoteness if the trace of the otherness of the other does not *leave* a trace in our presence which, therefore, has to realize itself as being vulnerable.

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<sup>44</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible* (p. 159): “We are interrogating our experience precisely in order to know how it opens us to what is not ourselves. This does not even exclude the possibility that we find in our experience a movement toward that what could not in any event be present to us in the original and whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences.”

<sup>45</sup> Levinas’ notion of “being-present”, in *Diachrony and Representation* (p. 98).

<sup>46</sup> E. Levinas: Wholly otherwise, in: R. Bernasconi, S. Critchley (eds): *Re-Reading Levinas*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1991, 3–10, especially p. 7.

My vulnerability is the other's gift, the gift which he gives to me because he will not disappear without leaving a trace.

“But leaving the trace is also to *leave* it, to abandon it, not to insist upon it as a sign. It is to efface it. The concept of trace is inscribed in being effaced and leaving the traced wake of its effacement ... in the *retreat*, or what Levinas calls the ‘superimposition.’”

“The authentic trace ... disturbs the order of the world,” says Levinas. “It comes ‘superimposed.’ ... Whoever has left traces in effacing his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left.”

Derrida comments on the structure of superimposition thus described as follows: it “menaces by its very rigor, which is that of contamination, any authenticity assured of its trace (‘the authentic trace’) and any rigorous dissociation between sign and trace.” Levinas himself was ready to admit that the trace of the other, which is, to be sure, not a sign like any other, nevertheless “also plays the role of a sign... Yet every sign, in this sense, is a trace.” Derrida concludes:

“The word ‘leave’ (*laisser*) in the locution ‘leave a trace’ now seems to be charged with the whole enigma. It would no longer announce itself starting from anything other than the trace...”<sup>47</sup>

The ambiguous trace must be our starting point wherever the retreat of the other inspires our historical lives. To the retreat of the other, which is for Levinas the true source of our vulnerability, corresponds our aging, our growing old. On the other hand, aging means for Levinas precisely taking leave of the world and others, and thus most basically expresses our longing for the other – rather than of *Trauerarbeit* in the aforementioned sense. Taking leave for Levinas means our surpassing the *conatus essendi*, our ontological fate. The human *esse*, he says, is not *conatus* but “desinterressement et adieu.”<sup>48</sup> Isn't, then, our presence precisely our being-as-inspired through the *adieu*, or, as I would prefer to say, *Abschied*, from the other? Our presence is not condemned to cling to its supposed ontological fate; as the presence of aging human beings, it instead presents itself in its vulnerability through the retreat of the other, who is always already gone. Isn't the *Abschiedlichkeit* of our lives, as we grow old from our earliest object-relations up to our last breath, the best evidence for the fact that the *au-delà-de-l'être* as our exposure to the other has its genuine place in the midst of our historical lives?

### III

Levinas' social philosophy can be interpreted as a description of a radical *othering* that affects our lives from the very beginning. This phi-

<sup>47</sup> J. Derrida: At this very moment in this work here I am, in: *Re-Reading Levinas*, op. cit., 37.

<sup>48</sup> E. Levinas: *La mort et le temps* (Cours 1975–1976), in: *L'Herne*, 1991, 60: 25.

osophy seems to claim that we always already find ourselves *othered* by the other. It is, however, our share to *realize* this.<sup>49</sup> And the *othering* that Levinas has in mind is not the product of a social praxis of more or less polemic *otherings* that *make others* out of others in a way that they may not be able to accept. Rather, Levinas describes an *othering* that happens in the very passivity of our exposure to the claims of the other. In our being exposed to the otherness of the other our existence turns out to be an *othered* existence.

<sup>49</sup> Thus, the otherness of the other appeals to the self who alone can realize its significance. It is true: this otherness is not simply “given” (Eagleton, *Trouble*, 226, 237) insofar as it depends on the self in order to acquire significance for a practical life that cannot simply “read off” from the otherness of the other what it is called upon to do. Otherness is not another name for a “pure transcendence” (or a surrogate for it) that would determine the ultimate sense of our life. Rather, its source is the *surplus* of the other’s alterity *beyond any relation in relation* with him or her. Thus, *without a relation to the other such a surplus cannot affect us*. Therefore, the surplus of otherness, as reminiscent of the Lacanian “Real” as it may be, is far from an absolute retreat into some region beyond any recognizable relationship (ibid., 230). It does not confiscate our independence in order to reduce us to spiritual slaves, rather, it calls for our own realization of its practical implications. Instead of “mesmerizing” us through a pure alterity denuded of all definitive cultural markers (ibid., 227) the interpellation of the other appeals to our practical subjectivity. (Cf. E. Levinas: *Autrement q’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, Haag: Nijhoff 1978, 97 f.) This holds true especially in political respect, that is, in our life in a *dimension of tertiality* that is already present in the face of every single other. Indeed: the other can be anyone who may “befall” us in a proximate or distant encounter. It is misleading, however, to oppose an “absolute” otherness in its allegedly pure transcendence as a “portentously hollow” category to everyday fellowships (ibid., 240, 259) – as if any real communication would ruin absolute alterity that in turn would, on that score, be unable to inspire our daily social and political life. Instead of such a caricature of Levinas’ ethical thinking one should take into account that he time and again insisted on the necessity of inscribing the ethical into the political – without thereby implying that the political could be in any sense reduced to the ethical. Neither did he advocate an “ethical fundamentalism” nor did he seek a reconciliation *à la* Hegel (ibid., 241). Rather, he located a multifaceted *différend* between the ethical and the political that turns up in and between modern societies – last but not least in the global horizon of an anonymous multitude of strangers. It is correct that Levinas nowhere offers an ethics for political institutions – afraid, as he was, that the “tyranny of the universal” that may be embodied in such institutions threatens the ethical with the permanent danger of being negated. It is also true that Levinas’ core idea of an ethical “interruption” of the political is too loosely (if at all) connected with concrete perspectives on a common (good) life in just institutions. On the other hand, he was far from a Kierkegaardian denigration of democracies that could be accused of annulling “the pure difference of individuals” in an inauthentic, anonymous multitude (cf. ibid., 167, 237; P. Delhom, A. Hirsch (eds): *Im Angesicht der Anderen. Emmanuel Levinas’ Philosophie des Politischen*, Berlin, Zürich: diaphanes 2005; A. Pinchevski: *By Way of Interruption. Levinas and the Ethics of Communication*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2005; B. Liebsch: *Menschliche Sensibilität. Inspiration und Überforderung*, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2008).

In his comments on the philosophy of Levinas, Ricœur has shown how this thought must lead us to a revised theory of the self which departs from Kierkegaard's premises. Each of us is not only a human being, a member of the human species and at the same time a completely, even absolutely different individual (as Habermas for example would have it<sup>50</sup>); rather, we are different selves who are radical others in relation to each other and at the same time *others in our own selfhood*.<sup>51</sup> That means, *we exist as others* in relation to others and even to ourselves. In Ricœur's perspective, Levinas has given a fascinating description of an otherness that affects each individual self in a way that precludes any sublation in the presence of the self. This does not mean, however, that the self must suffer an alienating *Veränderung* as described by Theunissen who took this notion as a pejorative one, thereby indicating that the self ideally *should not be othered* in this sense.

Levinas and Ricœur, in contrast to this implication, do not suggest such a privative and negative notion of *othering*; instead they insist that only a basically *othered* existence is not doomed to the ontological fate of a sort of self-care that is forever fixed on itself. *Othered* existence calls for a life that is from the very beginning concerned about its openness to the claim of the other – even if the other proves to be an alien or an enemy. Despite this ambiguity, Levinas<sup>52</sup> praises this openness – and even a vulnerability of human sensibility that exceeds what seems to be tolerable at all – as the form of an *unconditional hospitality* which makes our life a truly human life.

On a descriptive, phenomenological level this idea of openness cannot be convincingly demonstrated; it can only be *testified*. Levinas himself admitted this. Ultimately, he – a witness himself – gave us a new *interpretation* of human existence that does not reveal without further ado what makes it a *human* existence at all. To answer now – as Levinas' philosophy suggests – that only a radically *othered* existence offers at least the opportunity to live *a truly human, hospitable life*, however, is subject to political questioning. Politically, we do not exist *vis-à-vis* a single other but, rather, in diverse horizons of irreducible plurality. In the face of the other "the third" is always already co-present, claims Levinas himself.<sup>53</sup> The third is another other in the midst of numerous other others who are not only (directly or indirectly) related to each other by their radical otherness but, rather, who have to relate themselves to each other – if only to guarantee a minimum of hospitable life.

It is hard to believe that this should ever be possible by bypassing social practices which are inevitably structured by processes of *othering* as described by G. Simmel and many other authors (in different wording)

<sup>50</sup> J. Habermas: *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1997, 58.

<sup>51</sup> P. Ricœur: *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1992.

<sup>52</sup> In his writings on Marx, on "rough states" and on the idea of cosmopolitics Derrida seems to follow Levinas on this track (not without political reservations, however).

<sup>53</sup> E. Levinas: *Totalité et infini*, Hague: Nijhoff 1980, 187.

in recent debates on cultural theory. This means, our *othered* existence must situate itself in contexts of political co-existence which gravitate, as it were, around the question whether, in what respect and to what extent we can, we are allowed to or even must *other* others without doing violence to them. Yet how should we ever be able to come to terms with this question if we refuse to come back to a primary otherness that has always already affected us and, thus, set limits to any attempt to “make” the other an *other* at our own, sovereign discretion?<sup>54</sup>

Insofar as current cultural theory suggests that it is up to us to determine under what stipulations any other will count for us as an *other* it cannot indicate where such a procedure potentially harbours violence. On the other hand, Levinas’ interpretation of what it means to exist *othered* – that is, to live a life in the wake of the other’s effacement – does not tell us where exactly the demarcation line should be drawn between a non-violent relation to the other and forms of *othering* that refuse to do justice to others who will never accept being others only at some other’s discretion. If we want to put the question adequately as to how it could be made possible that relations to others are non-violent or (if that is a lost cause) at least that there is only a minimum of violence in these relations<sup>55</sup>, the contributions of a radical ethics *à la* Levinas, of ontological descriptions of forms of reifying and alienating *Veränderung* and of cultural unmaskings of more or less violent practices of *otherings* should unite. Only in concert will these contributions help us to clarify as far as possible what is at stake in an inevitably *othered* existence that proves from the start to be inspired by an original *othering* and suffers time and again from violent *otherings* which we inflict on each other – without finding shelter in an isolated, singular self that would turn out to be inalienable and independent of any other, any otherness, even of its own...<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. G. Spivak: Subaltern Studies. Deconstructing Historiography, in: D. Landry, G. MacLean (eds): *The Spivak Reader*, London, New York: Routledge 1996, 203–235, esp. p. 217.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. *Human Studies. A Journal for Philosophy and the Social Sciences* 36, 2013, 1 – a special issue on the concept of violence.

<sup>56</sup> I am grateful for Donald Goodwin’s revision of my paper.