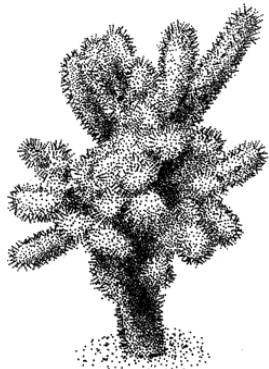


The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity



*the committee for the study of
desert alchemy*

Chapter 2: Contesting Vitalism

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power. It is, of course, little surprise that this hierarchy and the attributes of talents mirrored the racial hierarchy of the imperial imaginary—with Europeans endowed with superior talents and the colonized with base functions. Blavatsky reserved special animosity toward native Australians, whom she viewed as a demonic race. As we shall see later, so much of even Bergsonian modernism proper emerges out of occultist interpretations and their focus on hidden substances, race memory, and intuition as a privileged state of consciousness.⁶⁶

CHAPTER TWO

Contesting Vitalism

Life is a concept used in cultural conflict and a watchword, which was meant to signal the breakthrough to new shores. The banner of life led the attack on all that was dead and congealed, on a civilization which had become intellectualistic and antilife, against a culture which was shackled by convention and hostile to life, and for a new sense of life, “authentic experiences”—in general for what was “authentic,” for dynamism, creativity, immediacy, youth. “Life” was the slogan of the youth movement, of the *Jugendstil*, neo-Romanticism, educational reform, and the biological and dynamic reform of life. The difference between what was dead and what was living came to be the criterion of cultural criticism, and everything traditional was summoned before “the tribunal of life” and examined to see whether it represented authentic life, whether it “served life,” in Nietzsche’s words, or inhibited and opposed it.

—HERBERT SCHNÄDELBACH, 1984

Nietzsche, Lukács, Deleuze

I begin this general survey of some vitalist and antivitalist ideas with this passage,¹ already quoted in the introduction, for Schnädelbach articulates concisely the truths for which the *Lebensphilosophs* struggled. In this chapter, I shall discuss briefly some of the major voices in defense of vitalism, Nietzsche, Simmel, and Deleuze, as well as two important critics, the young Max Horkheimer and the older Georg Lukács. While I shall express skepticism of vitalism, I shall also argue against Lukács’ dogmatic reaction. In my opinion, Horkheimer’s sympathetic critique gets it just about right, but it is tragic as well, because even Horkheimer lost confidence in the alternative he had held to vitalism—an unorthodox Marxist mixture of Hegelian rationalism and praxis-oriented materialism. I do not think that vitalism or praxis philosophies can ground critical theory today.² In fact, far from grounding critical theory, vitalism is likely to resume the forms it has often had in the past—mysticism and occultism.

However, life has long been a critical category, and I shall now survey some key moments in its history. In his analysis of the life concept in German philosophy, Schnädelbach writes that the *Frühromantiks* introduced the powerful contrasts between “the dynamic and the static, the living and the dead, the organic and the mechanical, the concrete and the abstract, and intuition, perception, and abstraction and the mere understanding.”³ But

Schnädelbach insists that *Lebensphilosophie* proper originated with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. If for Hegel the passions would incite the action by which reason would manifest itself in the process of actualizing Freedom, the two *Lebensphilosophs* insisted on a dualism between will and reason, spirit and life. The fraught recognition of Life as a blind force followed upon disillusion in Absolute Idealism, in the optimistic philosophy of history that Reason was manifesting itself in the dynamic process of actualizing Freedom. In this sense, vitalism was a pessimistic philosophy arising out of the disillusion with failed revolutions of 1789 and 1848. In his countermetaphysic, Schopenhauer had already understood reason in instrumental terms. While for Schopenhauer there was tragedy in the ineliminability of the dominance of life over spirit, Nietzsche feared that spirit, though an instrument of life, “could make itself independent and turn against life itself.”⁴

As Ofelia Schutte argues, Nietzsche was able to charge the Western philosophical tradition with a resentment against life and the devaluation of “its ontological analogue, temporality,” by taking something other than life “as more real or worthy than life because life’s ‘opposite’ is thought to transcend change.”⁵ From Nietzsche, whose influence grew with the catastrophe of the Great War, it was learned that there was no more divisive yet effective rhetorical technique than to paint one’s enemies as against life, for this seemed to protect one’s own views from reasonable criticism.⁶ The call for the transvaluation of all values was thus unsurprisingly issued in the name of life. Now a watchword, life would become as central to early twentieth-century thought as “nature,” “God,” or “ego” had been in other ages. This was indeed Nietzsche’s intention: “The concept of God, devised as a rival concept to life—it makes a horrible union of everything harmful, poisonous and deceitful, the whole deathly conspiracy against life! The concept of the Beyond and the true world, invented to devalue the *only* world that there is—leaving no purpose, reason or task for our earthly reality.”⁷

But it was not earthly existence Nietzsche affirmed but life and indeed only those who best embodied it. Contempt for those who did not followed. Cultural forms and types of beings were brought before the tribunal of life; since, then, the truth or value of something was judged only in terms of its service to the Will or Life or the Will-to-Power—the morally empty drive of antisocial individuals bent on conquest and domination—vitalism opened the door to the unholy trinity of irrationalism, amoral power politics, and biologicistic thinking, as Schnädelbach argues. To the

Occultism and mysticism stood at odds against a society newly obsessed with consumption and production. In an industrial and commodity society, the material—that is the tangible and apparent—constituted both the ontological and the valuable. Such a world is devoid of deeper, inaccessible mysteries. It is through these spiritualist movements and not scientific debate that vitalism gained its widest exposure, so that by the interwar years the language of “life” would need little clarification to the public at large. Unlike the discourses of the sciences, the occultist and spiritualist movements attracted participants from a wide spectrum of European society. The British occult societies illustrate best this broadening. Although they were decidedly marked by the class biases of their times—top-heavy in upper-class leadership and virtually devoid of working-class participation—these societies did nonetheless manage to popularize and circulate current philosophical and social thought to the petit bourgeoisie.⁶⁵ Influential figures and freethinkers, artists and intellectuals of the burgeoning symbolist and modernist movements, Irish and Indian nationalists, and various other social and political reformers traveled through the occult circles along with the most ordinary professionals. The list of renowned members of these societies is numerous: W. B. Yeats and Bram Stoker were members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the composer Erik Satie was an associate of the Rosicrucians, and George Bernard Shaw and the countless Fabians, most notably Annie Besant, were followers of Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophy.

The popularization of vitalism through the occult underlines a key element of vitalist discourse: the belief in inner and hidden causal factors. Occultism provided a perfect vehicle through which the contradictory vocation of a science of the “unknown” could be practiced. The rituals of these secret orders bore the mark of theatrics, performances through which the “determining essences” of men could be realized. The Golden Dawn, which reached its peak in popularity during the interwar years, focused on a mangled version of the Nietzschean will to power, offering complex and often violent rituals that claimed to endow initiates with the power to exert pure will on others. Aleister Crowley, the movement’s grand mystic, embodied this fantasy of absolute control in the his doctrine of “do what thou wilt.” The Russian-born seer Madame Blavatsky made similar claims to influence and vision, focusing less on harnessing the will of initiates and more on tapping into the great reserves of “racial memory.” What is most notable about Blavatsky’s writings is her division of the world into a complex racial hierarchy, with each group laying claim to its own animating

relationship with the British occult movement. He was connected to these movements through marriage: his only sister, Mina Bergson, married the notorious MacGregor Mathers, a self-proclaimed mage and founder of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Upon their marriage, Mina changed her Latinized given name to the Celtic, Moina, in accordance with the Order's Druidism and interest in Celtic cultural revival.⁶¹ In addition to his family relations, Bergson was also a member of the famed Society of Psychical Research, an elite organization made up of a rather impressive collection of internationally renowned scientists whose initial vocation was to investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers latent in man. However, as occultism grew in influence and the Society of Psychical Research attracted more skeptics and scientists, its focus shifted to debunking the extravagant claims of occult leaders.

It was the literary figure T. E. Hulme who introduced Bergson's work to both the British occultist circles and the Anglo-American modernists with his introductory essays and his 1913 translation of Bergson's more rigorous *Introduction to Metaphysics*. As R. C. Grogin has shown in *The Bergsonian Controversy in France, 1900–1914*, the occultist revival created fertile ground for the reception for Bergson's philosophy, at whose center were life experiences and life forces that were not discursable but accessible solely through other more mysterious means.⁶² Despite the ready availability of his work, the occultists did not engage with the details of Bergson's critique of positivism; rather, they selected key concepts to give a philosophical imprimatur to their mystical doctrines. Regardless of their superficial interpretations, however, elements of Bergson's work did indeed overlap with occultist doctrine. Himself a member of the Groupe d'Études de Phénomènes Psychiques (Group for the Study of Psychic Phenomena), Bergson's notion of the *élan vital*—the life force that permeates all things, attainable only through our higher intuitive faculties, proved to be the most important conceptual appropriation.⁶³ For the occultist, it became the philosophical evidence of a universal energy that surges through and connects all things—matter, humanity—with the cosmos. The *élan vital* gave substance to the occultist projections of “cosmic energy” and divine forces. The principal goal of spiritualist and occultist practices was to enable its participants to reach higher planes of consciousness; their doctrines either recommended that one delve within, maximizing one's inner experiences, as in the case of the occultist, or, as in the case of the spiritualist, that one look without, channeling this universal force through the will to manipulate the external world.⁶⁴

call for justice and Christian brotherhood Nietzsche counterposed life as the action principle of a morally unencumbered noble race. Schopenhauer's linking of the will with barbarism, even though he sought escape through asceticism, represented the originary point of fascist thought, which culminated in the Third Reich's appeals to myth and *Blutgemeinschaft*. From its origins in the salubrious Romantic critiques of mechanical materialism, vitalism descended into interwar-year philosophies of reaction and irrationalism via the seminal contributions of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.⁸ Nietzsche's notorious words from *Beyond Good and Evil* are difficult to overlook:

Life itself is *in essence* appropriation, doing injury, overpowering the alien and the weaker, oppression, hardness, the imposing of one's own forms upon others, physical adoption and at the least, at the mildest, exploitation. . . . “Exploitation” does not belong to a corrupt or undeveloped primitive society: it lies in the *essence* of living things as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the actual will-to-power, which is precisely the life will.⁹

In *A Study of Nietzsche*, J. P. Stern has provided us with perhaps the most unforgiving critique of Nietzschean vitalism as an unsystematic and contradictory doctrine for what became the aforementioned unholy trinity. Collecting Nietzsche's scattered pronouncements on life, Stern has written:

But what is life? There is no single topic on which Nietzsche has so lavished his descriptive gifts. . . . “Life” . . . is a repudiation of all that is sick and near to death, it is cruel towards all that is weak and old in us and around us, a perpetual struggle waged always at the expense of another life, it is impious toward dying and perpetually murderous. . . . The assent to life entails the destruction of morality, which is nothing but the instinct to negate life (or as the Devil remarks to the hero of Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, “Life, you know, isn't fastidious, and it doesn't give a damn for morality!”). What is life? It is being different and exercising strong preferences, being unjust and partial and limited; it is full of antagonisms, for the agreement of all is a principle hostile to life; it rests on immoral presuppositions and flourishes in danger; it is not a mere desire-to-survive, but a wanting-to-grow; it is constantly being tested by the greatest possible odds and must maintain itself against the most profound

discouragements—indeed it is that testing itself. It is not peace; on the contrary, where the antagonisms of men, classes and nations are appeased, and life's enemies—the sick, the mad, the criminal and the disinherited—are cosseted, there the pith of life declines. . . .¹⁰

This is, of course, a far cry from utilitarianism and pragmatism, which are grounded in an evolutionary theory that has made the struggle for life the primary fact and derived from it the value of strategies and behaviors that increase the chances of survival—adaptation, piecemeal change, and parsimonious thought by which the waste of energy could be minimized. Indeed, Nietzsche understood his thought as fundamentally opposed to what he saw as the stifling implications of Darwinian ethics. Jean Gayon has recently analyzed the deep vitalist roots of Nietzsche's reluctance to accept Darwin's "struggle for existence" and "natural selection":

What [Nietzsche] ultimately disliked in those principles was that they emphasized "conservation" rather than "augmentation." Indeed, in the literature of that time, both principles were often formulated in terms of "survival." Struggle for survival, in Darwin's own terms, meant that some individuals would "survive" and others not. As for natural selection, it meant, in Spencer's famous phrase, "survival of the fittest." To Nietzsche, such a vocabulary evoked Spinoza's *conatus* (the effort by which each being enforces the preservation of its own being), Schopenhauer's *will to live*, and the moralist's trivial "instinct of conservation." In light of his romantic view of existence and life, that was the most miserable conception he could imagine. . . . Nietzsche's contempt for the vocabulary of "conservation," "preservation," and "survival" pervaded all his writings. But it probably was best expressed with greatest crudity and clarity in the *Genealogy of Morals*, in the context of the criticisms of the "ascetic ideal": "*The ascetic ideal springs from the protecting instinct of a degenerating life which tries by all means to sustain itself and to fight for its existence; it indicates a partial physiological obstruction and exhaustion . . . Life wrestles in it and through it with death and against death. The ascetic ideal is an artifice for the preservation of life*" (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1887, III, 13). That passage suggested that the "struggle for existence" was a conception of "degenerated," "sickly," "unhappy," "exhausted," "weak" people. That was the exact opposite of what Nietzsche meant by "struggle for power": augmentation, increase, excess, prodigality.

therefore, as a marker, pointing to explanatory limits.⁵⁶ This idea of entelechy as an indication of the limitations of the mechanists' knowledge is, in Cassirer's opinion, the most critically interesting and useful. Yet Driesch, like so many of his contemporaries, was not content with a negative expression of entelechy; late in life he developed into a full-fledged metaphysician, and his understanding of entelechy developed into a positive system: "it became the *ens realissimum*, the most real of all being." The entelechy does not exist in space, nor does it belong to nature and to natural science, but for those reasons we must see in it the actual wellspring of nature, in which "the power and seed of all activity" discloses itself.⁵⁷ "Entelechy became a supernatural positive force; in the processes of development it was this guiding 'life force' that itself chose which of the laws of physics would allow for the realization of a complete embryo."⁵⁸ Entelechy is the force that guides and manipulates the laws of the material world.⁵⁹ For Driesch, the entelechy eventually came to be understood as the *Führer* principle of the organism; politics was thus able to borrow from biology what it had possibly already lent it.⁶⁰

Vitalism and the Occult

Driesch's flight from biology to metaphysics and politics speaks to the marginal position of vitalist thought within the established sciences of the late nineteenth century. The positivists in the natural sciences had little patience for fanciful postulations of a "vital agent"; it goes without saying that many scientists dismissed as vestigial superstition and religious thinking vitalist assertions that any unseen and insubstantial agent might influence the material world. Scholarly works that advised of the limits of science and institutional religion were feverishly sought; the American philosopher William James and the British theologian Evelyn Underhill were particularly popular among the occultists. Excluded from the traditional sciences, vitalist thought flourished in eclectic, turn-of-the-century bohemian circles: the occult and alternative social movements. Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, the Rosicrucians, and Aleister Crowley's Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn had members who were attracted to the broad tenets of vitalism.

Bergson's work, which represented the sharpest critique of mechanist and materialist assumptions, earned him substantial influence in these European circles. Bergson himself had a rather complicated and intimate

length, I want to explore now the mystical and occultist roots of Bergson's vitalism as a way of introducing my critique, inspired by Horkheimer. That is, I want to move from vitalism as a form of political mystification to vitalism as an expression of mysticism.

Life as Hidden Force

What was life? No one knew. It was undoubtedly aware of itself, so soon as it was life; but it did not know what it was . . . it was not matter and it was not spirit, but something between the two, a phenomena conveyed by matter, like the rainbow on the waterfall, and like the flame. Yet why not material?—it was sentient to the point of desire and disgust, the shamelessness of matter became sensible of itself, the incontinent form of being. It was a secret and ardent stirring in the frozen chastity of the universal; it was a stolen and voluptuous impurity sucking and secreting; an exhalation of carbonic gas and material impurities of mysterious origin and composition.

—THOMAS MANN

The embryologist and philosopher Hans Driesch asserted that while most functions of the living organism may be mechanically understood, it is the development of the embryo that illustrates the essential difference between the living and the inanimate. Driesch reformed the Aristotelian concept of *entelechy* to account for the mystery of embryological development: it was the hidden influence of a life force that “allowed the organism to survive the vicissitudes of the environment and the embryologist's knife.”⁵³ It was an experiment in which Driesch, having divided the embryo of a sea urchin, observed that the organism proceeded to develop into two separate beings, which demonstrated this phenomena.⁵⁴ A machine, if divided into two, would not reconstitute itself into two whole machines, but splitting an early embryo into two blastula could result in the development of two full organisms. No machine would be capable of self-reproduction in a manner analogous to living organisms. *Entelechy*, he argued, was the invisible hand that guides an organism to its completed form; observing this processes does not grant us direct access to the “wonder of life,” as many vitalists have argued, but it does allow us access to its trace effects.

This *entelechy* began as a “system of negations.” As Cassirer writes: “entelechy is abstracted from the realm of spatial existence” and “describable only in negative terms.”⁵⁵ It functions in the critique of mechanism,

We can now understand what the philosopher meant by opposing “struggle for life” and “struggle for power.” For the romantic and aristocratic thinker, life could not amount to merely “surviving”: “Life itself is to my mind the instinct for growth, for durability, for an accumulation of forces, for power” (*The Anti-Christ*, 1888, 6).¹¹

There are few questions more contested in humanistic studies than the nature of Nietzsche's *Lebensphilosophie*. Centered on the concept “life” and defined in various and contradictory ways (as indicated by interpretative contestation over the meaning of the closely allied doctrine of the will to power), Nietzsche's thought speaks to vitalism as a critique of metaphysics, as a philosophy of history, and as a moral politics. As already noted, Nietzsche is easily read (and I am very sympathetic to these readings) as an apologist for crude biologicistic “thinking,” an advocate for the destruction of the idea of the possibility of true human progress, and an enthusiast for wanton cruelty, and I am hardly convinced that he is the most important critic of a dualistic and hierarchical Western metaphysics—soul and body, cause and effect, man and nature.¹² Yet Nietzsche's influence on postcolonial artists (Césaire, in particular) was real; the troubling presence of Nietzsche simply cannot be wished away. One is led to the seeming paradox that an irrationalist, racially biologicistic, eugenicist, and counterrevolutionary philosophical school—the very school that informed imperialist self-understanding—would appeal to colonial intellectuals seeking the rebirth of their cultures.

For this very reason, I would urge that vitalism be understood as a polysemous discourse, a swerving historical discourse that has many side streets (and blind alleys) to which I shall take an appropriately peripatetic approach in this chapter. Philosophical vitalism proper is best understood, however, as running along two main parallel avenues, one beginning with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and the other with Bergson. Nietzsche will remain an interlocutor in this and the next chapter, though I shall not offer as extensive an interpretation of his thought as I shall of Bergson's. I shall argue eventually that the tension between Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire can be understood in part as rooted in their different conceptions of vitalism—Senghor's conception Bergsonian, Césaire's also Bergsonian but also Nietzschean in important ways (and quite surprisingly Césaire's Dionysian Nietzsche seems similar in some respects to Heidegger's debiologized one!).

With this promissory note, let me return to the analysis of vitalism. Martin Jay has sharply summarized Max Horkheimer's critique of *Lebensphilosophie*.¹³ Studying the tradition of the philosophy of life from Nietzsche to Dilthey to Bergson, Horkheimer developed a dialectical analysis thereof. On the one hand, he emphasized how *Lebensphilosophie* served as an important protest against the narrowing of reason into a rigid, abstract rationalism and therefore served to connect thought back to the needs of life; in fact, as Schnädelbach points out, Marx critiqued Hegel for theorizing a pure dialectic of concepts without much awareness of how concepts and culture arose out of the needs and pressures of life. Horkheimer also found in *Lebensphilosophie* an effort to rescue the living individual from the deadening weight of conformity and law-regulated social life. But Horkheimer also critically probed the philosophies of life. While I shall return to Horkheimer's critique of Bergson in the next chapter, it is helpful to present the gist of his critique now.

First, in grounding action and cognition in life, an ahistorical force, Horkheimer argued that life philosophies threatened to eliminate the historical aspects of social life. Second, Horkheimer found in life philosophy an evasion of the material dimensions of life; as we will see, Bergson's attempt to fashion a new mode of cognition suited to life's dynamics—intuition—was an idealist response to alienation: it could only leave the world as it was. Third, and in contradiction to this point, Horkheimer argued that a critique of the narrow view of the intellect had led to an active irrationalism in the name of life. This I will show in the next chapter, but let me quote here Horkheimer on this point:

[Bergsonian metaphysics] expresses a protest against the fixed forms of life of bourgeois society. The same historical dynamic which constrained the originally progressive parts of the bourgeoisie before and during the war to following the economically authoritative groups also changed the meaning of activist *Lebensphilosophie* and transformed it, often against the intention of its initiator, from a progressive power of social critique into an element of contemporary nationalist ideology.¹⁴

Aside from Jay's characteristically perceptive summary, there is very little discussion of Horkheimer's critique of *Lebensphilosophie* in the (massive) secondary literature on the Frankfurt School. (I shall return to other aspects of Horkheimer's critique in the next chapter).¹⁵ *Lebensphilosophie* may seem to be such an anachronistic doctrine that Horkheimer's critique

represented only as *yet-to-come*: what woman might be, what can become, what races are in the process of becoming, which cannot be known in advance or definitively and is incapable of being measured.⁵⁰

To experience life is to invent it, but to invent life one must not identify—and here John Rajchman also puts his emphasis—with the molar forms or gross identities already found in society or reduce oneself to an individualization of any pure class or race within society. Grosz understands becoming other as a collective project. Yet Deleuze enjoins one to live “a life,” a life that is impersonal yet singular. While Julien Benda famously critiqued activist intellectuals for treason against their professional creed of abstract humanism by militant identifications with the causes of classes, races, or nations, Deleuze too excoriates the intellectual for speaking on behalf of collectivities. The grounds of opposition are different—Benda speaks in the name of universality, Deleuze in the name of singularity—but the destructive consequence as to social classes of any sort is the same.⁵¹ And becoming singular does a violence of its own—a devaluation of the shared life one already has with others as a result of history and the need for organized challenges not in the name of peoples yet to come but in the defense of peoples who have already come to be silenced, denigrated, or excluded. For without such collective struggle by actual minorities (not those becoming minority in the sense Grosz articulates, and here one must mean something more by becoming other than the advertising imperative to create ever better-defined niche markets, for today power works not simply through the “mechanical” reproduction of identity but vitally through the production of difference),⁵² individuals may not have access to the preconditions to invent life actually, or they may understand themselves as singular, or having become other, without in fact having become so in terms of their actual life chances, grounded as they are in the molar categories not yet in fact left behind. Vitalism provides the metaphysics for the Deleuzian devaluation of classes for creative minorities yet to come.

These juxtapositions of Lukács, Simmel, and Deleuze have been meant to suggest the political multivalence of vitalism and to guard against its simple acceptance or rejection. I remain ambivalent about Deleuze's own vitalism and yet am unconvinced by the criticism that he (or Simmel) is a mystic of a peculiar kind. However, I do agree with Hallward that mysticism is an important aspect of Bergson's own thought, and my criticism of Bergson's philosophy will be less ambivalent than my judgment of vitalism as a whole. Having discussed the political implications of vitalism at some

mysticism is this? Does the abandonment of the category of the subject and the search for lines of flight rather than social contradictions lead necessarily “out of this world” (*Out of This World* being the provocative title of Hallward’s book)? Certainly Hardt and Negri do not think so. They have celebrated the new, greater possibilities of dissolution of old, fixed identities for temporary, new becomings that concretize out of what they call the multitude and cross the old lines of nation and class. In a breathtaking display of Deleuzian concepts, they refer to the “plural multitude of productive, creative subjectivities of globalization [who] are in perpetual motion . . . and form constellations of singularities and events that impose continual global reconfigurations on the system. This perpetual motion can be geographical, but it can refer also to modulations of form and processes of mixture and hybridization.”⁴⁸ The problem here does not seem to be mysticism but mystification or actually a failure to understand the tragic obdurateness of our own social forms. Deleuze, I propose, should be read next to Simmel.

The call for submission to the spark of life also creates consternation on my part. Similar to Bergson in the insistence that we cannot discover the social trajectory through intelligence but must rather simply trust ourselves to that force in nature (*élan vital*) that pushes on in unknown directions, the Deleuzian feminist Grosz promulgates a kind of anti-intellectualism: “an unpredictable leap into virtuality . . . which carries no pre-given plan or guarantee except a derangement of the present order, a movement of rendering its order insecure and replaceable. This leap into the virtual is always a leap into the unexpected, which cannot be directly planned for or anticipated, though it is clear that it can be prepared for.”⁴⁹ Yet it is hardly clear what is liberating about the call for blind action, which disavows any interest in planning or consequences. Even though Deleuzian vitalism obviously does not push in politically intolerable or fascist directions, one worries about the dangers of the necessary undermining of security in an already neoliberal age for the sake of the merely nebulous.

Yet Grosz does speak inspiringly of the creative possibilities of the poststructuralist philosophy of life:

Sexual difference and racial difference cannot be understood productively except in terms of such internal difference, for they cannot be understood as the comparison of two or more already known and measured sexes, two or more given races, categories of groups. Rather, they can be

of it may seem no more important today than critical theoretic investigations of the vulgar, fascist apologists Gustav Klages or Othmar Spann. Yet as Schnädelbach argues, the premises of *Lebensphilosophie* never disappeared: they were absorbed first into existentialism and have remained an integral part of German philosophical and social thought, evident in as far-reaching movements as the Greens and Paul Feyerabend’s anarchistic philosophy.

Why *Lebensphilosophie* only appeared in disguise is hardly surprising. As Lukács emphasized, fascist ideologists found their pivotal conception in the antithesis of the alive and the dead: demagoguery took aim at the “dead” bourgeois world of “security.”

Dead was the bourgeois world of “urbanity” and “security” with all its social and cultural categories like economy and society, secure living, pleasure and the “inner life.” Dead was its thinking, both that of classical humanism and that of Positivism, since it lacked intuitions and daring and was therefore—soulless, despite all the inwardness. With its sharp attacks on everything that it called bourgeois culture, militant fascist vitalism proudly declared its allegiance to irrationalistic nihilism and agnosticism, albeit in language which appeared to give them a mythical, positive element.¹⁶

Paradox resulted, for vitalistic fascism made the death and destruction inherent in total militaristic mobilization the basis for “an intensely lived primordial experience (*Urerlebnis*), a kind of electric shock and spasm that breaks the continuity of experience (*Erfahrung*) that is transmitted and crystallized in culture.”¹⁷ Among the most historically important polemics against vitalism, Georg Lukács’ *Destruction of Reason*¹⁸ suffers from its unabashed Stalinism (evident in its unreasoned commitment to a rigid stagist and dogmatically progressive philosophy of history and its championing of Lysenko’s biology). Lukács argued that the apparent irrationality of society—its inexplicable boom-and-bust cycle, its monetary crises, and its overproduction in the midst of plenty—suggested to intellectuals trapped within bourgeois horizons that society was guided by inaccessible and enigmatic forces, which took the name of life. Pessimism and social-scientific nihilism gave way to vitalism, and vitalism in turn sanctioned in the name of life racial imperialism as a salvific response to social crises.¹⁹

To Adorno and others, only political capitulation could explain how Georg Lukács, who in his early work relied on Romantic conceptions of

life and subjectivist Bergsonian, against objectivist, conceptions of time could write such a polemic.²⁰ Yet Adorno's critique is somewhat unfair, since while in *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács did question "the value of formal knowledge in the face of 'living life,'" he had also already underlined that irrationalist vitalist philosophies were dead ends to the extent that they were based on the rejection of reason: "Whether this gives rise to ecstasy, resignation, or despair, whether we search for a path leading to 'life' via irrational mystical experience, this will do absolutely nothing to modify the situation as it is in fact."²¹

In *The Destruction of Reason*, Lukács firmly located the fundamental error from Schelling to Dilthey in the appeal to intuition as a substitute for reason, which was putatively inadequate to grasp life itself. Rational explanation seemed to privilege stasis, fixity, and mechanism. The vitalists claimed that neither Darwinian mechanism nor biochemical reductionism could explain the emergence of new and complex organic types nor the process of growth and adaptation they underwent. Not only did reason fail to explain the properties of life, but it had no access to lived experience, *Erlebnis*. Reason had to deform life in order to grasp it; life remained truly apprehensible only through intuitive or expressly irrational modes. So with this, Lukács simply dismissed the Diltheyan hermeneutic program for the study of history as an irrational focus on unrepeatable lived experience and tendentiously claimed the superiority of a causal theory of the dialectical laws of history.

Hermeneutics depended, Lukács insisted, on the substitute of intuition for reason, a substitute that could only be the privilege of a few, leading to what Lukács refers to as "aristocratic epistemology," which in an amazing leap of thought Lukács argued was later made the reserve of the *Führer* and his bully boys, who insisted that life-affirming courses of action could not be defended through reason. Reason had become the enemy, the objective study of society and economics in particular was considered an obstacle to submission to life-affirming myth, and Lukács could certainly point to Carl Schmitt as the logical endpoint of irrationalism in political and juridical theory. But Lukács suggests fantastically that the roots of such fascist apologetics are in Dilthey's philosophical reflections on the problems of historical understanding.

While recognizing that mechanical materialism left many of life's characteristics unexplained and even more that *Verstand*—understood as the abstract intellect or understanding as manifested most notably in mathematical and natural-scientific thinking—had its limit, Lukács then makes

subjectivity can only lead to neglect of and even contempt for other aspects of our lives.

My criticism of Deleuze is that there is too little room for acknowledgment in his own ascetic, transcendent vitalism (transcendent of extant forms) of what Simmel called the tragedy of life.⁴⁴ Simmel understood life as a self-continuing process, *mehr-leben*, but he also recognized the fact that life is necessarily more than life, *mehr-also-leben*. Life does not only consume materials to preserve itself; rather, it objectifies—in fact must objectify—itsself in forms of art, knowledge, and religion, which then enjoy independence from life and move in accordance with their own respective laws. The point here is that life is not only more life; it is also necessarily more than life. More life requires the social cooperation made possible by more-than-life, that is, the objectivity of cultural forms. Once these forms are created, they can follow a life of their own: we are inherited by them more than we create them; consequently we are constrained by their logics. We moderns are likely to feel alienated as well by the profusion of cultural forms beyond the capacity of any one, single individual to assimilate. This Simmel calls tragedy because the alienating forms with which we are confronted and by which we are overwhelmed originate in the deepest recesses of our own being. Yet even as there comes a point at which these forms that were to serve life now imprison it, it is not a matter of will or a personal asceticism that they can be easily transcended in the name of more life or the spark of life. We can thus compare Simmel's sober tragedy of culture to Deleuze's ever-present possibility of vitalist rupture or incorporeal transformations.⁴⁵

Hallward also presents Deleuze as the heir of Bergsonian optimism, which (he argues) given its impatience for creation and novelty can only race out of this real and refractory world into a pursuit of personal mystical experience as an end in itself. Deleuze is critiqued as an impractical and antipolitical thinker, indeed as a mystic.⁴⁶ Yet Deleuze defended Nietzsche's critique of Schopenhauer: life should be its own enrichment, a form of Dionysian intensification. And Hallward seems to equivocate: "The actual is not creative but its dissolving can be. In keeping with Nietzsche's critique of Schopenhauer, although actual or creaturely forms like the I must be replaced, such replacement should proceed in and by creative individuation as such, through the power of those individuating factors which consume them and constitute the fluid world of Dionysus."⁴⁷ Hallward argues that Deleuze's philosophy is in fact guided not by renunciation, as the power of invention is valued above all else. So what kind of

persons to free themselves of the attachments to these molar identities over and between which political conflict is staged.³⁶ Consequently, as with Nietzsche, vitalism commits Deleuze not to a general acceptance of life in its manifold, finite forms located on a plane of immanence but to a hierarchy of living things ranked in terms of their capacity to experience and become anything at all.³⁷ And this in turn implies that Deleuze's object of critique must be exactly those "forms of life that are themselves against life, life that comes from life but is inimical to it."³⁸

In the end, Deleuze seeks not the imprisonment of certainty through rational introspection—*Cogito ergo sum*—but abandonment of the self for the impersonal spark of life and yet more life: *Muto ergo vivo*. Focusing on the process of changing rather than on the possessor of this change, Deleuzian vitalism implies that no one possesses life, for change cannot be predicated on something that itself is not supposed to change. Vitalism in its most radical forms implies this pro-drop syntax. Even more generally, Deleuze proposes an ontology of the infinitive verb form: things are derivative, effects of verbs; subjects and objects lose substantiality.³⁹ Life thus strains the intelligibility of the sentence but is not for this reason itself irrational. Nietzsche's influence on French poststructuralist thought is profound. Dismissing the subject as an illusion of grammar that sets subject apart from object, Nietzsche would write that "there is no substratum; there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting and coming; the 'doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything."⁴⁰ As Nik Fox emphasizes, the insight was carried over first to the radical Lacanian idea that the Subject is not an ontological datum but rather a *meconnaissance* and then to Deleuze's idea of the subject as a mere syntactical marker. While Christopher Norris writes of Deleuze's distrust for concepts and the symbolic order because of their distortion of lived experience based in the body and its drives, affects, desiring machines, and polymorphously perverse instincts,⁴¹ Badiou argues that Deleuze's vitalism can only lead to a devaluation of our bodily needs: because we are only what we become, the path to health must be through the lessening of the self.⁴²

What seems to me awry here is not Deleuze's asceticism; Badiou's own theory of the interpellation of the subject by the event reads to me as another form of vitalism. Arguing that we only achieve subjectivity through our fidelity to an event, he seems to me to have written a philosophical mandate for the intensely lived experience that comes from an infinite responsibility to that event. According to Badiou, we are only alive in our militance.⁴³ Needless to say, such a constricted view of vital (and heroic-male)

dogmatic claims for *Vernunft*, by which he meant dialectical thinking. (As noted, Lukács gave as an example of dialectical thinking Lysenko's biology, which set itself against modern genetics on ideological grounds!) Again he argues that irrationalists turn the failure of nondialectical social and natural science into nihilism. Lukács' logic is difficult to follow, but the argument seems to be that once the rational understanding of life and the scientific conquest of biology were dismissed as impossible—Hans Driesch's move from biology to metaphysics is important here, as I discuss below—the stage was set for those demagogues who could claim to understand the deeper mysteries of life and race. (It is not difficult to hear resonances in the Intelligent Design debate today of such extrapolation from life's mysteries to proof of the existence of a reactionary God whose message can only be intuited by a special few authoritative teachers.) The book ends with a long chapter on racism and social Darwinism as the culmination of irrationalism and vitalism in the imperialist epoch. To give something of the vulgar character of this work, let me quote Lukács:

The line we are tracing does not mean that German fascism drew its ideas from this source [vitalism] exclusively; quite the contrary. The so-called philosophy of fascism based itself primarily on racial theory, above all in the form developed by Houston Chamberlain, although in so doing, to be sure, it made some use of vitalism's findings. But for a "philosophy" with so little foundation or coherence, so profoundly unscientific and coarsely dilettantish to become prevalent, what were needed were a specific philosophical mood, disintegration of confidence in understanding and reason, the destruction of human faith in progress, and credulity towards irrationalism, myth, and mysticism. And vitalism created just this philosophical mood.²²

Prolix and at times insightful, Lukács' analysis loses contact with that which was valid in life philosophy, artificially restricts the scope of vitalism to Germany (the imperialist power that the Soviet Union did fight), and caricatures the doctrine, to wit: "In fine: the essence of vitalism lies in a conversion of agnosticism into mysticism, of subjective idealism into the pseudo-objectivity of myth."²³ It is also hardly clear that reactionary thought was any more vitalist than mechanist or that any doctrine (other than nationalist and racial thinking) played an important role in the rise of fascism, though, as I hope to show, vitalism's contribution to racialism has indeed been underestimated in the critiques of so-called scientific racism.

From this all-out war against vitalism, I want now to comment on the always confounding discourse of Deleuze, who has been the major figure for the rehabilitation of vitalist discourse and Bergsonism in particular.²⁴ “Thinking,” Deleuze writes of Nietzsche in an almost programmatic statement, “would then mean discovering, inventing, new possibilities of life.”²⁵ But the life Deleuze has in mind here is peculiar indeed and certainly not related to the *blut-und-boden* vitalism of fascism.²⁶ In his recent study, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*, Peter Hallward finds the core of Deleuze’s philosophy in his comments on the character Rogue Riderhood in Charles Dickens’s novel *Our Mutual Friend*.²⁷ An unsympathetic figure, Riderhood is now on his deathbed. While the doctor attempts to revive the patient, those who never had the least sympathy for Riderhood find themselves moved by the struggle for life. What they are transfixed by, however, is not Riderhood’s life as such but the spark of life itself. Life is conceived here as impersonal yet singular. Catherine Gallagher had already brilliantly disclosed the strangeness of the scene:

In this episode, life takes on its pure reality and absolute value only because it has been entirely disembodied. . . . No one . . . has any interest in the fate of the man himself. . . . When that potential and hence essential life begins to instantiate itself in the particular body of Rogue Riderhood, its value dissolves. . . . As Rogue Riderhood’s suspended animation clearly shows, the curious separation of life from the body is the refinement and purification of vitality itself.²⁸

For Deleuze, then, life itself refers to the process by which virtuality, this spark of life, concretizes itself into actuality or creaturely forms while ever differentiating itself; actualization is inherently creative and dynamic:

A life has quite different features than those associated with the self—the consciousness, memory, and personal identity. It unfolds according to another logic: a logic of impersonal individuation rather than personal individualization, of singularities rather than particularities. It can never be completely specified. It is always indefinite—a life. It is only a “virtuality” in the life of the corresponding individual that can sometimes emerge in the strange interval before death. In short, in contrast to the self, a life is “impersonal and yet singular,” and so requires a “wilder” sort of empiricism—a transcendental empiricism.²⁹

Deleuze has painted “a picture of a complex preindividual field that allows for the generation of specific individual forms but also is not bound or reducible to those forms. They posit a field of difference that outruns any specific biological forms or individuals while still giving rise to them.”³⁰ Alain Badiou’s remarks are arresting:

The name of Being [for Deleuze] is Life. But it is so far who does not take life as a gift, treasure or survival but as a thought returning to where every category breaks down. All life is naked. All life is denuded, abandoning its garments, codes and organs. Not that we are headed for the nihilist black hole. Quite the contrary, we stand at the point where actualization and virtualization switch places, so as to be a creator. This is what Deleuze calls a “purified automaton,” an increasingly porous surface to Being’s impersonal modalization.³¹

So the strange idea here is that Deleuze understands life as impersonal, denuded, and purified, yet life is the basis of creativity. As Hallward has argued: “Creation always involves an escape, a fleeing, a flight, an exit. The essential effort is always to extract a pure potentiality, a virtual creating from an actual creature, such that the former can be thought of as independent of the latter.”³² In other words, life only becomes a creative force once the self abandons creaturely forms—not out of renunciation but for the sake of new productions and configurations.

And now having revived Bergson’s quasi-mystical conception of the Absolute as “the great river of life,” of life itself as unceasing creative action, “an internal push” that expresses itself in nature and human activity while itself being “inexpressible,”³³ Deleuze went to radical lengths to resolve this resultant paradox: if reality is inexpressible flux, then those who have made a “discursable world” must have been themselves carved out of that flux.³⁴ Or again: if reality is only the seamless becoming of life, and the solidified, the inert, and the lifeless are myths or only illusory reifications or processes in the way of our radical opening to what is yet-to-come, then who exactly has conjured up this world of things?³⁵ The key moment of Deleuze’s philosophy is his attempted resolution of this paradox; as already suggested, he attempts, in dizzying yet intriguing fashion, to dissolve selves into the flux of what he calls preindividual and presocial singularities, an impersonal plane of pure immanence in which there has not yet been any making of selves marked by the molar identifications of family, clan, or nation. The possibility of new becomings out of these singularities allows