**Translation Samples – Richard Lambert**

**Sample 1**

**The first sample consists of the initial pages of a dialogue between Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy, published in French as *La Tradition allemande dans la philosophie*. My translation of the book was published by MIT as *On Freedom: Technology, Capital, Medium*.**

**German Philosophy: A Dialogue**

**VÖLKER**: I’d like to begin with a very general question. For both of you, German philosophy plays an important role in your works, as does the question of the timeliness of philosophy, i.e. the timeliness of its intervention in the present. How would you assess the state of the philosophical relationship between France and Germany?

**BADIOU**: In my view, philosophy exists in a discontinuous manner. I believe there are certain philosophical periods. The idea of a continuity, a tradition, is in any case an academic idea. And as for the idea that the human being is a philosophical animal, that philosophy exists always and everywhere—that’s a platitude of contemporary journalism. There are discontinuous philosophical periods and these can be located historically. There was of course the great Greek philosophical period. There was a great Arabic period, appended to this Greek period. In the seventeenth century, there was a French period that began with Descartes and included Malebranche, Spinoza, and Leibniz—even though Leibniz was German and Spinoza a Flemish Jew. At the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was an English period with Locke, Hobbes, and Hume. Then there was a German period that we now know as German Idealism, with Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. And it seems to me that in the twentieth century there was something like a Franco-German period, which revolved around phenomenology. It began quite early, with Husserl, and then Heidegger, and in France we had Sartre, who went to Berlin just before the war, and Merleau-Ponty. What we are seeing today is perhaps, and I’m taking a risk here, the end of the French period—or “the French touch,” as the Americans say, who contributed much to its academic popularity. And if we look a little closer, this is perhaps also a Franco-Slovenian period—let’s not forget Slavoj Žižek and his descendants. As I said, this period began with phenomenology and particularly with a complicated relationship to Heidegger in Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, and Ricoeur. It continued through French structuralism, as marked by Lacan and Foucault in particular … and sitting before you now are two late representatives—two survivors—of this approach.

So what was this French period, which began as a Franco-German period and then became increasingly French until it came to represent France in America? It was, I believe, an attempt to establish philosophy in what I would call a new place. The aim was not to circumscribe philosophy in an academic fashion, but rather to relate it to its outside in an extremely vital way, to nourish it on literature, painting, cinema, mathematics, and psychoanalysis, while also breathing new life into the vitalism of Nietzsche and Bergson, as Deleuze did. In this way, all of these thinkers sought to establish a renewed critical role for philosophy, with close ties to the political. There were of course different tendencies. There was Derridean deconstruction. There were the postmoderns, like Lyotard. There was the Strasbourg school, with Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. And then there were more individual endeavors, such as my own, which I would gladly describe as neoclassical. In sum, then, the philosophical relationship between France and Germany passed through a period of great exchange and proximity between the thirties and the sixties, or a little longer—in any case over a long time that, rather remarkably, included the Second World War.

So where are we now? I’d say we are probably at the end of this period. And we don’t know where we are going. There is great uncertainty about the fate of philosophy in general, especially where the Franco-German relationship is concerned. In fact, it seems to me that the question of the state of philosophy today, as reflected in the Franco-German relationship, is one that will depend on you—I mean, in light of where we are holding this discussion, on you young Germans, but of course also on those young French people who are interested in philosophy.

Before I finish, I’d like to add that I have long been in favor of the fusion of France and Germany. I’m not a great champion of Europe. What is Europe, ultimately, without Russia, without Turkey, clinging to a defensive and rather uncreative relation to its former imperial grandeur? No, what I’d like to see is the fusion of France and Germany. One single country, one single federal state, and two main languages, that’s quite possible. France is an old country, crushed by the weight of its history, shriveled up and conceited for no reason. Germany, on the other hand, is a very uncertain country. It doesn’t know what it is; it’s desperately looking for itself and always has been. If we were to fuse France and Germany we would put an end to dear old France and give Germany a real youth. And what would philosophy be then? Well, I think it would be truly Franco-German. And that would perhaps be its most glorious period of all. That’s my contemporary myth.

**NANCY**: There is first of all a paradox here. We are discussing philosophy between France and Germany or the Franco-German philosophy of Alain’s prophecies, and yet we are French—how strange! But perhaps not as strange as it might seem, since I think that between the two of us there’s something very subtle, barely visible, which is marked as a form of French sameness, yet also functions as a difference between “more France” on the one hand and “more Germany” on the other. I don’t know if you would agree with that, but…

**BADIOU**: So I’m too French and you’re too German?

**NANCY**: Too? *Warum nicht*? I don’t know. In any case I think I can follow the historical path you have sketched quite clearly, but I would add something to it and at the same time change its trajectory a little. Where you said, “despite the war,” for example, I would tend to think that it wasn’t despite the war but rather precisely because of it. In other words, France in fact became philosophically more German during the interwar years, with the introduction of Hegel into France by Kojève, the proximities between Bataille and Heidegger (which aren’t well known but they exist), and many other such factors. I think it’s no coincidence that with the onset of the First World War—which was the first great shockwave, the beginning of the end for Europe—a sort of intersection emerged that was essentially marked by the importation of German philosophy into France, which until then had remained curiously unknown. It wasn’t that the means of communication were lacking, but there was ultimately little transmission of thought. The Second World War then saw the departure of a number of philosophers from Germany, and at the same time, just after and even during the war, the invigoration of French thought by what was coming out of Germany.

Yet I think we can also trace these phenomena further back within the history of philosophy you outlined. We could add that it has often been said of the great German Idealism—and, incidentally, of Early German Romanticism—that it marked a contrast with France, because in France there was a revolution while in Germany there wasn’t. In Germany there were no grounds for it, just because Germany wasn’t yet Germany. From Kant to Hölderlin to at least Hegel, the German philosophers understood themselves, in their own striking ways, to be operating in the absence of a revolution or in the expectation of another revolution, or to be in the process of ushering in a revolution that would be speculative rather than political. That’s a phenomenon that has very often been commented on. And I think that it touches upon something in thinking itself. It’s as though, just because Germany hadn’t yet been unified, while France had been for a long time (so long that now, I completely agree with you, it is faltering and suffering because it’s too old), Germany developed in its thinking—with Fichte, Hegel, and so on—what it had not yet realized as a state. On the other hand, however, the French Revolution was in fact a philosophical operation. It involved the realization and putting into practice of a whole mode of thinking, while in Germany one felt at least partially powerless before the hypothesis of a revolution, or regarded it from a certain distance. I have to think of Kant here, who on the one hand extended his usual daily walk to receive news of the revolution and on the other declared that we do not have the right to strike down the sovereign. So there is perhaps something important here, since it suggests that the Franco-German relationship has long been a philosophical relationship. And you are quite right, we would of course have to include England too, but then things would become very complicated, since what happens in England also plays a role in the politico-economic context in which this philosophical displacement takes place.

I don’t want to go into a detailed analysis of that here—that’s another question—but what I asked myself before this encounter was this: what key trait can I keep in mind where Germany is concerned? What did German philosophy essentially contribute when it so invigorated French thinking? I would say that there is perhaps something that appears with (and only with) German philosophy—something that is already present yet barely visible in Kant, and that becomes increasingly manifest in Hegel, Schelling, Hölderlin, and then Heidegger—namely, a preoccupation with the idea that the saying of philosophy, its enunciation, the mode of its enunciation—even its voice, if you like—should be present in what is said. If we take up the conceptual pair of the “saying” and the “said” here, without necessarily referring to Levinas, we can note that since Descartes and the ideologue philosophers of the revolutionary era, French philosophy has tended to take the form of a somewhat neutral mode of discourse and enunciation that manipulates objects. Germany, meanwhile, steeped thought in language from the outset. Leibniz was the first to declare that German was the best language in which to philosophize, but also that it wasn’t yet mature enough. No French thinker ever said anything of the like. And later we had Heidegger’s statements on the advantages of German. I would say, then, that in this Franco-German relationship—you put this in a different way, but it overlaps with what I’m trying to say—the German element is more of a saying within the said, which also means that it’s a philosophical discourse that is an act in itself, that is already something in its own right. That of course doesn’t mean that it is praxis *tout court*, but that it itself is also a praxis. In that regard, there’s someone you didn’t mention, and that’s Marx! Ah, you did it on purpose! Marx, incidentally, was perhaps the first almost Franco-Anglo-German philosopher. Or rather, in Marx there is both a grand discourse that manipulates objects and a voice that speaks, that wills, that wants to be heard and wants to let an appeal, a certain sensibility, ring out.

**BADIOU**: But Marx is so little German! Perhaps he’s not exactly a philosopher either. Anyway, let’s leave Marx to one side.

**Sample 2**

**The following is the Preface to Peter Trawny’s *Technik.Kapital.Medium: Das Universale und die Freiheit*. My translation of the book was published by Bloomsbury as *On Freedom: Technology, Capital, Medium*.**

Preface

We tend to assume that the world could be otherwise, both where our personal and our collective lives are concerned. Life, we take it, is not a matter of destiny; it can be changed. The individual is self-determining. The notions of revolution and utopia likewise trade on the idea that the present state of things is the product of chance—that if only we took matters into our own hands…

What we presuppose here is a *freedom* that seems to make us responsible not only for our own actions but also for the state of the world. Our moral life and our conception of law depend on it, and the meaning of the political, of democracy, is based upon it.

The idea that such a freedom exists, however, is problematic. The conditions and preconditions of our thought and action are by no means so neutral and contingent that they could yield another world than the one in which we find ourselves. There are no possible worlds. What is, is necessary, as it is.

The philosopher who elaborated this insight was Spinoza, and his thinking informs my own in what follows. It was Spinoza who explained that contingency does not exist and that human freedom consists merely in being unaware of the conditions and preconditions of our thought and action. Freedom is ignorance.

In other words: we are constantly surrounded by possibilities. All possibilities are open to us; they could not but have been and could not but be open to us. In accordance with the universal ontology constituted by technology, capital, and the medium, they cannot not be open to us. In the universal of technology.capital.medium (TCM), all possibilities are gathered and stored. This TCM universal is the absolute possibility. There are no possible worlds; *this* world is always the absolute possibility. TCM is the universal of freedom.

Yet there are also other forms of freedom. As we will see, these are forms of freedom from the freedom of the TCM universal. The last and the highest of these is the *impossible*. Yet how can the impossible be freedom?[[1]](#endnote-1)

Only philosophy is in a position to ask and answer this question. Only philosophy grants us the freedom from which freedom can be thought and perhaps even experienced. To be sure, academic philosophy, like everything else, is almost completely integrated into the TCM universal and its various channels. Whether we can still extricate ourselves from these channels is an essential question for philosophy. For if philosophy were to conceive itself wholly as an aspect of the TCM universal, it would indifferently abandon itself to the freedom of TCM, i.e. to a freedom determined by the TCM universal.

The subject, who comes to be determined as an individual and a person, is integrated into the TCM universal. The affectivity of this state is ambiguous. Whereas my generation, which grew up under the shadow of Auschwitz, largely gave itself over to the banal order of a life divided between work and the private sphere, younger generations seem at least to have an ambivalent relation to the power of the TCM universal. This power is nonetheless stable, as it cannot but be.

In this treatise on freedom and systematic universalism, my concern is to understand the integration of the emancipated subject into the TCM universal. My view is that *in* the world there is no alternative to this integration. Only beyond the world is there a form of freedom that can be understood as an echo of those hi-stories in which there was something else at stake than the subject’s inevitable integration into the universal unity of technology.capital.medium. Cultural critique, then, has never had it so good. With every step the subject takes, the authentic eye is alerted to the presence of technology, capital, and the medium. Yet it still lacks understanding.

Nevertheless, there is no reason to lament the state of the world. Reality must be given its due. Nothing is real without reason. (And what is the rationality of reality—of *our* reality?). In the wake of the catastrophes of the twentieth century, we can of course no longer think like Hegel, who gave an unparalleled metaphysical justification of the real. Technology, capital, and the medium nonetheless make up a world in which life is possible. We are as far from the apocalypse as we are from heaven. That may be tedious, but it is not tragic. Professional doom-mongers foresee the end at every turn, where in truth only delicate sensibilities are offended.

We embrace technological devices, capital, and image channels of all kinds. We delight in the pleasure of the surface, the exposé, and money. We love to consume. We no longer have any passion and belong to a time sober enough not to regard its aberrations too harshly. Loudly bemoaning the present time is itself bemoaned.

In the universal immanence of TCM, critique is anachronistic. This is because all critique is always already embraced by its object. The fact that capital welcomes its own critique pushes the critic to become ever more critical, ever more incisive. It forms her primary motivation. For we know that there is and can be no real alternative. All critique is thus in fact constructive… Perhaps it is then more important to understand the anachronistic nature of critique than to continue with it.

Nowhere is this more true than in the political domain. National, ideological, and geopolitical differences have become anachronistic and thus meaningless. Like ghosts, they appear one moment only to vanish the next. There is no longer any place whose rules are not dictated by the TCM universal. Those who celebrate an “other” beginning—a break with TCM—are condemned to mere rhetoric. They may be stars of the “left” or “right,” but their efforts are hollow and in vain. Even those religious fanatics whose barbaric actions defy the imagination are sheer non-entities; their deeds are as empty as their victims’ suffering is great.

If what is more powerful than the subject is that which the subject cannot master, then this is true of the TCM universal. And if (a) God is the most powerful entity we can conceive of, then TCM is almost (a) God—almost, since, as we will see, it does not constitute its own beginning. Nor is it capable of entirely dominating the constituent elements of subjectivity, though these elements—the determinations[[2]](#endnote-2) of intimacy—are only accorded a marginal role within the world of the TCM universal.

The TCM universal necessarily produces forms of life that fall out of sync with the universal’s present determinations. I term such forms of life *anachronisms*. The universal’s primary anachronism is perhaps religion. Fundamentalism is nothing but a reaction to the realization that the god of religion is no longer the highest power in our world. If religion should continue to exist at all, it will only be as a dimension of intimacy. Its explanatory power—its capacity to explain the world to the collective by narrating it—is exhausted. Those who cling to such anachronisms know this, but are reluctant to renounce the comforting security of the old stories. They are all the more aware of it insofar as these stories—universally, and not just in ‘the West’—have long since come to be incorporated into the production processes of the universal. Like everything else, they represent capital. Even anachronisms are forms of capital: nostalgic capital.

The power of the universal is so pervasive that the question of revolution and its failure to materialize has again come to be raised in certain quarters. It was once said that “ethics applied to history is the doctrine of revolution.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Yet even a revolutionary of the order of Ulrike Meinhof ultimately doubted whether one could “make” a revolution, since now there is “no place and time” from which “you” could begin.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The style of the present text is terse—hard even—and the book is not without its ironic and parodic passages. In order to see the necessity for this concision, however, it is important to consider the detailed endnotes, which reference the philosophical sources tacitly referred to throughout the text.

Parts of the book were written in February 2013, during a Caribbean cruise on the *MSC Poesia* (!). The ship rounded Cuba without dropping anchor in Havana; the island remained out of reach.[[5]](#endnote-5)

As Godard showed in his *Film Socialisme*, the cruise ship is in many respects a parable for contemporary society. But unlike those who would perhaps hold strictly to historical events, I am of the view that the cruise ship is unsinkable. I would even claim that the Titanic, the shipwreck *par excellence*, in truth never sank. Its dead—particularly those whose names we know—are not dead.

But the cruise ship is also a place where it is possible to grasp the infinite intimacy of philosophy, its inviolable impossibility, whose invisible shadow spans millennia. In other words: we must still philosophize, yet “beyond the human.” What follows is an untimely *ode to philosophy* for our time.

1. The project as a whole can be seen as an elaboration of the following fourfold textual constellation: Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, ed. Manfred Stassen, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Continuum, 2003), 279–304; Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002); Jürgen Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” in *Toward a Rational Society*, trans. Jeremy Schapiro (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 81–122; Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126. Heidegger’s reflections provide the overall thematic framework; Marcuse recognizes and deepens this problematic, but develops rather lazy solutions to it. Habermas’s essay is a masterwork, and perhaps the most important text he has written. Althusser interprets the concept of ideology as a form of medium. The period separating Marcuse and Althusser was one that took its leave of the revolution—which brings us to our contemporary situation. The project is given further impetus by Jacques Derrida, who writes: “A set of transformations of all sorts (in particular, techno-scientifico-economico-media) exceeds both the traditional givens of the Marxist discourse and those of the liberal discourse opposed to it. […] [These mutations] disturb political philosophies and the common concepts of democracy, they oblige us to reconsider all relations between State and nation, man and citizen, the private and the public, and so forth.” Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 88. Philosophy’s present task could hardly be more clearly stated. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “*Determinationen*.” The latter term can refer on the one hand to the constitutive qualities of a thing (i.e. to the particular way in which it is determined or determines itself), as when Kant writes, “Existence is not a predicate or a determination of a thing” (Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy*, 1755-1770, ed. and trans. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).2.72 (117). On the other hand, “*Determinationen*” can also refer to the factors or conditions by which something—such as our behavior, the political sphere, etc.—is determined. These two senses can also overlap, and the *Determinationen* that are generated by and constitutive of the TCM universal, for example, can themselves function as *Determinationen* of our behavior. For the sake of consistency, “*Determinationen*” is usually translated here by “*determinations*,” except when it seems clear that only the second sense is intended. In such cases, “determining factors” or “determinants” are used instead—TR. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Benjamin, “Zur Geschichtsphilosophie, Historik und Politik,” in *Fragmente: Autobiographische Schriften. Gesammelte Schriften VI*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “As a result of the market’s complete penetration of all relationships within imperialism and the nationalization [*Verstaatlichung*] of society through repressive and ideological state apparatuses, there is, however, *no place and time* of which you might say: there I begin [*von da geh’ ich aus*].” As cited in Peter Brückner, *Ulrike Marie Meinhof und die Deutschen Verhältnisse* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1976), 176. An interesting semantic shift takes place in this statement: setting out from rather commonplace ideological conceptions, it then turns to a direct personal experience, namely that there is now “no place and time” from which “you” could begin. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Things have changed in the meantime. Cuba’s links to the TCM universal, which of course already existed, are now being intensified. It is only a matter of time before Cuba is integrated into the universal topography. Its liberation has begun. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)