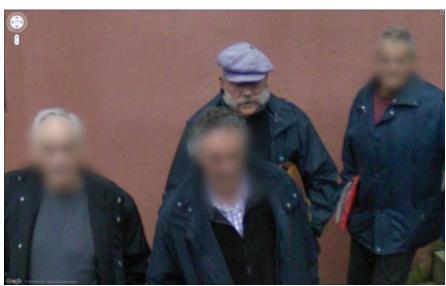**"Black Box, Black Bloc"**
A lecture given at the New School in New York City on April 12, 2010
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Facial recognition and autoblur software, Google Street View,
20 Rue de la Vicarie, Saint Brieuc, France.

Of all the revivals in recent years--a period of history in which the revival itself
has been honed to such a degree that it persists as mere "blank parody"--the
revival of Hegel is the most startling, although certainly not for those involved.
Hegelianisms of all shapes and sizes prevail today, from Catherine Malabou's
dutiful reconstruction of the "plastic" dialectical transformations, to the hysterical
antimaterialism of Slavoj Žižek and his convocation of the inescapable bind
between the "determinate negation" and the "wholly Other," from which explodes
the terror of proletarian power. Is not Woody Allen's character Alvy Singer in
Annie Hall the perfect summation of Žižek's political project: *Okay I'm a bigot,
but for the left!* Or consider the unrepentant Hegelian Alain Badiou who stakes
everything on being as a pure formalism that only ever realizes itself through the
event, an absolute departure from the state of the situation.

Only the Hegelian dialectic, and not the Marxist one, can snap back so
cleanly to its origins like this, suggesting in essence that *Aufhebung* was always
forever a spectralization and not a mediation in general, that in other words the

ultimate truth of the Hegelian dialectic is spirit, not negation or becoming or anything so usefully mechanical. The negation is thus *revoked* during synthesis, much more than it is resolved. This would be one way to read the current intellectual landscape, as so many revoked materialisms, so many concepts too terrified by matter to matter.

And so the question comes again, always again: is the dialectic a medium, or does the dialectic demonstrate the absolute impossibility of any kind of mediation whatsoever? What is the status of the obscure, of negation, of the dark corners of being that are rarely ever subsumed by dialectical becoming, or even strategically excluded from it?

Where are we now? In an essay from 2001, the French collective Tiqqun speaks of what they call the cybernetic hypothesis: "[A]t the end of the twentieth century the image of steering, that is to say management, has become the primary metaphor to describe not only politics but all of human activity as well."[1] The cybernetic hypothesis is, in Tiqqun's view, a vast experiment beginning in the overdeveloped nations after World War II and eventually spreading to swallow the planet in an impervious logic of administration and interconnectivity. "The cybernetic hypothesis is thus a political hypothesis, a new fable... [It] proposes that we conceive of biological, physical and social behavior as both fully programmed and also re-programmable."[2]

The essay is interesting not so much for Tiqqun's description of the late twentieth century, a description of cybernetic society that has become increasingly common today. Rather it is interesting for how the collective describes the appropriate political response to such a hypothesis. They speak of things like panic, noise, and interference. They propose counterstrategies of hypertrophy and repetition, or as they put it "to execute *other* protocols."[3]

Yet there is always a strategic obscurantism in their proscriptions, what Tiqqun calls here "invisible revolt." "It is invisible because it is unpredictable to the eyes of the imperial system," they write, lauding the virtues of mist and haze: "*Fog is the privileged vector of revolt ... Fog makes revolt possible.*"[4]

Invisibility is not a new concept within political theory. But what I would like to explore here is a specific kind of invisibility, a specific kind of blackness that has begun to permeate cybernetic societies, and further that this blackness is not simply an effect of cybernetic societies but is in fact a necessary precondition for them.

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1 Tiqqun, "L'Hypothèse cybernétique," *Tiqqun* 2 (2001): 40-83, 44.
2 Ibid., 42.
3 Ibid., 69, emphasis added.
4 Ibid., 73, 80. See also Tiqqun's concept of the "human strike," particularly in the text "Comment faire?," *Tiqqun* 2 (2001): 278-285.

The black box: an opaque technological device for which only the inputs and outputs are known. The black bloc: a tactic of anonymization and massification often associated with the direct action wing of the left. Somehow these two things come together near the end of the twentieth century. Is there a reason for this?

Close your laptop tight and what do you see? A smooth outer opaque shell, hiding and housing a complex electronic machine within. With the lid down, there is little with which to interact. Pick it up, put it down, not much more. Open it again and see the situation reversed: now concave, the external surface of the machine is no longer opaque and smooth, rather it is plastered over with buttons and sockets, speakers and screens, boxes and windows, sliders and menus, clicks and drags, taps and double taps. Splayed open, the box begs to be touched, it exists to be manipulated, to be *interfaced*.

There are two kinds of black boxes. The first is the *cypher* and the second is the *function*. With the lid closed the laptop is a black box cypher. With the lid up, a black box function.

The black box cypher was very common during modernity. Marx articulated the logic cleanly in *Capital, vol. 1* with his description of the commodity as having both a "rational kernel" and a "mystical shell." It is a useful device for Marx, portable and deployable at will whenever the dialectic needs to be triggered. Thus the commodity is a black box cypher, but so is value, and so is the relationship between exchange and production, ditto for the class relation, and on and on. Superimpose the cypher and begin to decode. This is the "rational kernel, mystical shell" logic at its most pure: untouched, the phenomena of the world are so many cyphers, so many mystical black boxes waiting to be deciphered to reveal the rationality (of history, of totality) harbored within.

The black box cypher is similar to Leibniz's monad. Like the monad, the cypher "has no windows." It is a cloaked node with no external connectivity. Think again of the laptop with its lid closed. The case is a turtle shell designed to keep out what is out and keep in what is in. This is what the commodity is, to be sure, but it is also what the sign is, what spectacle is, and what all the other cultural phenomena are that model themselves after the commodity logic. Interiority is all; interface is but a palliative decoy, a flourish added for people who need such comforts.

But this is only one half of the story, a half that has served quite nicely for decades but nevertheless needs to be supplemented because, quite simply, the mode of production itself is now a new one with new demands, new systems, and indeed new commodities.

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If it could speak today, the black box would say:

Let us reconnect to the noisy sphere where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, for this is the plane of production, on whose threshold is already encoded a million mantras for the new economy: "Do what feels right." "Reach out and touch someone." "Play hard." "Don't be evil."

Fortified with a bright array of windows and buttons, the monad ceases to be a monad. It is still the old cypher, only now it has an interface. It is a cloaked node, one whose external connectivity is heavily managed. Consider how a function works in computer languages, or an API (application programming interface), or a network socket. What is consistent across all these technologies is the notion that visibility should be granted, but only selectively and under stricture of specific grammars of action and expression.

While its conceptual origins go back to Marx and the nineteenth century, the term "black box" enters discourse proper in the 1940s via military tech slang. Seeking the origins of the black box, Philipp von Hilgers recalls the year 1940 and the Battle of Britain, particularly the transport out of the country of some of Britain's technical secrets via the so-called Tizard Mission. An emergency wartime diplomatic expedition, the Tizard Mission arrived in Washington, DC on September 12, 1940 carrying vital items packaged inside of a black, metal box with the hopes that American scientists could assist their British allies in developing new technologies for the war effort.[5] Inside the black box was another black box, the magnetron, a small microwave-emitting tube suitable for use in radar equipment, which had been modified in recent years from a transparent glass housing to an opaque, and therefore "black," copper housing.

On a small scale the magnetron was a black box that allowed the Allies greater flexibility with their radar, but on a larger scale the confrontation of the war itself was a veritable black-box theater in which enemy objects and messages were frequently intercepted and had to be decoded. The new sciences of behaviorism, game theory, operations research, and what would soon be called cybernetics put in place a new black-box epistemology in which the decades if not centuries old traditions of critical inquiry, in which objects were unveiled or

5   Philipp von Hilgers, "Ursprünge der Black Box," in Philipp von Hilgers and Ana Ofak, eds. *Rekursionen: Von Faltungen des Wissens* (Berlin: Fink, 2009): 127-145. For a detailed investigation of the origins and outcomes of cybernetics research in America see Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (Autumn, 1994): 228-266; he discusses black boxes on pages 246-252.

denaturalized to reveal their inner workings--from Descartes's treatise on method to both the Kantian and Marxian concepts of critique to the Freudian plumbing of the ego--was replaced by a new approach to knowledge, one that abdicated any requirement for penetration into the object in question, preferring instead to keep the object opaque and to make all judgements based on the object's observable comportment. In short the behaviorist subject is a black-boxed subject. The node in a cybernetic system is a black-boxed node. The rational actor in a game theory scenario is a black-boxed actor.

Warren McCulloch describes the black box at a meeting in Princeton during the winter of 1943-1944 attended by Norbert Wiener, Walter Pitts and others:

> [We] were asked to consider the second of two hypothetical black boxes that the allies had liberated from the Germans. No one knew what they were supposed to do or how they were to do it. The first box had been opened and [it] exploded. Both had inputs and outputs, so labelled. The question was phrased unforgettably: "This is the enemy's machine. You always have to find out what it does and how it does it. What shall we do?"[6]

War planes often contained technologies such as radar that should not fall into the hands of the enemy. To avoid this, such technological devices were often equipped with self-destruction mechanisms. Thus when McCulloch says, in this hypothetical scenario, that the first black box exploded he is referring to the fact that its self-destruction mechanism had been triggered. Box number two remained intact, and no telling if there would ever be a chance to capture additional boxes with which to experiment. Thus no attempt could be made to explore the innards of the second box, least risk a second explosion. Any knowledge to be gained from the second box would have to be gained purely via non-invasive observation. The point here is that because of these auto-destruct mechanisms, it was inadvisable if not impossible to open up devices (black boxes) gleaned from the enemy. The box must stay closed. The box must stay black. One must concentrate exclusively on the outside surface of the box, its inputs and outputs.

This is but one historical vignette, of course, yet as this new epistemological framework developed via what, following Norbert Wiener, Peter Galison calls the Manichean sciences and what Tiqqun calls the Cybernetic Hypothesis (cybernetics, operations research, behaviorism, neutral nets, systems

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6   Warren McCulloch, "Recollections of the Many Sources of Cybernetics," *ASC Forum* 6, n. 2 (Summer, 1974 [1969]): 5–16, 12.

theory, cellular automata, game theory, and related disciplines), it became more and more clear that the black box was not simply an isolated device. The black box grew to become a constituent element of how entities and systems of entities were conceived. "[T]he cybernetic philosophy was premised on the opacity of the Other," writes Galison. "We are truly, in this view of the world, like black boxes with inputs and outputs and no access to our or anyone else's inner life."[7]

It is thus today no longer a question simply of the enemy's black box, but the black boxing of the self, of any node contained in a network of interaction. The enemy's machine is not simply a device in a German airplane, it is ourselves: a call center employee, a card reader at a security check point, a piece of software, a genetic sequence, a hospital patient. The black box is no longer a cypher waiting to be unveiled and decoded, it is a function defined exclusively through its inputs and outputs.

Is this the death of Freud and Marx and hermeneutics in general? At the very least one might say that Marx's principle for the commodity has finally come full circle. Today instead of Marx's famous rational kernel in the mystical shell, one must comes to grips with a new reality, *the rational shell and the mystical kernel*, for our skins are already tattooed, our shells are keyboards, our surfaces are interactive interfaces that selectively allow passage from the absolutely visible exterior to the absolutely opaque interior. The shell is rational, even as the kernel remains absolutely illegible. These new black boxes are therefore labeled *functions* because they are nothing but a means of relating input to output, they articulate only their exterior grammar, and black box their innards. Computer scientists quite proudly, and correctly, call this technique "obfuscation." "Function" black boxes include the computer, the protocol interface, data objects, and code libraries. RFC 950 on subnetting procedures puts this principle quite well: "each host sees its network as a single entity; that is, the network may be treated as a 'black box' to which a set of hosts is connected."[8] This new industrial scenario is one in which a great premium is placed on interface, while interiority matters very little, assuming of course that everything is in its place and up and running. These black boxes have a purely functional being; they do not have essences or transcendental cores.

This is why one must invert the logic of Marx's famous mandate to "descend into the hidden abode of production." In other words, and to repeat: It is no longer a question of illuminating the black box by decoding it, but rather that

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7   Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy," 256.
8   J. Mogul, et al., "Internet Standard Subnetting Procedure," RFC 950, http://www.faqs.org/rfcs/rfc950.html.

of functionalizing the black box by programming it. To be clear, the point is not to ignore the existence of the new black sites of production, from *maquiladoras* to PC rooms. On the contrary, these black sites are part and parcel of the new industrial infrastructure. The point instead is to describe the qualitative shift in both the nature of production, and perhaps more importantly, the nature of the consumer, for only by describing this new structural relationship can we begin to speak about the structure of critique. In other words, if Marx's "descend into the hidden abode of production" was an allegory for critique itself, what is the proper allegory for critique today? If neither the descent into production nor the illumination of hiddenness are viable options, what's left?

From the student occupations at the New School, to the political tracts circulating through the University of California, to Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee and other groups, there is a new political posture today, a new political bloc with an acute black-box profile.

The new mantra is: *we have no demands*. We don't want political representation. We don't want collective bargaining. We don't want a seat at the table. We want to leave be, to leave *being*. We have *no* demands.

The power behind the "no demands" posture is precisely that it makes no claim about power at all. Instead it seeks to upend the power circuit entirely via political nonparticipation. It would be wrong to cast this aside using the typical epithets of cynicism or nihilism, or even to explain it away using the language of state power versus terrorism, which we should remember is the language of Lenin just as much as it is the language of Bush, Obama, Sarkozy, and all the rest, for the key to this new political stance is in its subtractivism vis-a-vis the dimensions of being.

Are we not today at the end of a grand declension narrative beginning over a century ago from time to space and now to appearance itself? Is not the nineteenth and early twentieth century the moment in which time enters western thought, only to be supplanted after World War II by space as a new organizing principle? We can speak therefore first of an aesthetics and politics of time, back to Hegel and Darwin and Marx to be sure, but also achieving central importance in the work of Bergson and Heidegger, even Benjamin with his interest in nostalgia and reproduction, or Einstein's scientific treatment of time, or the great 1900 media (as Kittler calls them), the phonograph, the cinema, and all the other temporally serial recorders of empirical inputs. The subsequent breakthrough of structuralism then was not so much the elaboration of the linguistic structure, but the synchronic as such, the anti-temporal, a development so startling that it must only be balanced and recuperated with an equally temporal counterpart in the

diachronic.

Nevertheless if the earlier phase introduced a politics of time, the post-war period ushered in a new politics of space. So by the 1970s and '80s we hear of "situations" and "geographies," of "territorializations" and "lines of flight," of "heterotopias" and "other spaces," of "nomadic" wanderings and "temporary autonomous zones," fueled in part by Henri Lefebvre's landmark *The Production of Space* (1974). And indeed it was Jameson who put forward the notion that postmodernism is not simply a historical periodization but quite literally the *spatialization* of culture, and hence his more recent call for a reinvention of the dialectic itself, not as a so-called engine of history, but as an engine of spatiality, a "spatial dialectic."[9]

This dimensional subtractivism, from time to space, leads to a third step, the politics of the singular dimension. Binary in nature, it reduces all politics to the on/off logic of appearance and disappearance. These are of course the stakes of any periodization theory whatsoever, not so much to assert that computers have taken over, or even the old vulgar economist truism that the so-called computer revolution is less the rise of computing as a new industrial vanguard but the wholesale reorganization of *all* sectors of industry around these new digital devices such that agriculture and logistics and medicine and what have you are now equally computerized, but that a certain kind of logic (binary, supplementarity, multiplicity, etc.) has come to be associated with a certain historical incarnation of the mode of production. The perverse irony, if we can call it that, is that today's binary is ultimately a false binary, for unlike the zeros and ones of the computer, which share a basic numeric symmetry at the level of simple arithmetic, the binaries of offline and online are so radically incompatible that they scarcely interface at all, in fact the "interface" between them is defined exclusively through the impossibility of interfacing: the positive term carries an inordinate amount of power while the negative term carries an extreme burden of invisibility and alterity. Today's politics then is a kind of rampant "dark Deleuzianism" in which affirmation of pure positivity and the concomitant acceptance of the multiple in all its variegated forms (Deleuze's univocal being as the absolutely singular One, populated with infinite multiplicities) results nevertheless in the thing it meant to eradicate: a strict binarism between us and them, between the wired world and the dark continents, between state power and the terrorists. The "no demands" posture flies in the face of all of this.

Again, the proposition: the politics of the new millennium are shaping up to be a politics not of time or of space but of appearance. So instead of Debord or Jameson or Lefebvre a new radical syllabus is shaping up today: Virilio's *The*

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9   Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009), 66-70.

Aesthetics of Disappearance, Lyotard's *The Inhuman*, or Levinas's *On Escape*. Instead of a politicization of time or space we are witnessing a rise in the politicization of absence- and presence-oriented themes such as invisibility, opacity, and anonymity, or the relationship between identification and legibility, or the tactics of nonexistence and disappearance, new struggles around prevention, the therapeutics of the body, piracy and contagion, informatic capture and the making-present of data (via data mining). It is no coincidence that groups like Tiqqun use anonymous umbrella names for their practice. Here is the Invisible Committee on the superiority of tactics of opacity over tactics of space: "For us it's not about *possessing territory*. Rather, it's a matter of increasing the density of the communes, of circulation, and of solidarities to the point that the territory becomes unreadable, opaque to all authority. We don't want to occupy the territory, we want to *be* the territory."[10] The question here is very clearly *not* one of territorial "autonomy" (Hakim Bey) or a reimagining of space (the Situationists), but rather a question of opacity and unreadability. As McKenzie Wark writes in his fine book *A Hacker Manifesto*, "There is a politics of the unrepresentable, a politics of the presentation of the nonnegotiable demand."[11] Strictly speaking then, and using the language of ontology, it is not simply that a new "cultural logic" has been secreted from the mode of production than it is a claim about logic itself (a logic of logic), for logic is the science of appearing, just as ontology is the science of being. And to be neat and tidy about things, we ought to remember that these new digital devices are all logic machines to begin with.

Tracking this current from the higher attributes downward, which is to say from time to extension (space) to ontics (presence/existence), I shall indulge in that most dismal science of prediction, at my own peril to be sure. Sequentially speaking, then, after ontics comes ontology. So in the future, near or far, one might expect to see a new politics of being, that is to say not simply a politics of durational or historical authenticity or territorial dominance or even identification and appearance, but quite literally a newfound struggle over what is and what can be. Substitute prevention with *preemption*. Substitute the activist mantra "no one is illegal" with "no *being* is illegal." Not just skirmishes over the politics of the body (which in the overdeveloped world have been evacuated to nothingness by all the limp affectivists with their body modifications and designer pharmaceuticals), but struggles over the politics of being. This will not resemble the twentieth century critiques around essentialism and antiessentialism, for postfordism put an end to that discussion once and for all, leaving us wondering whether we really want what we wished for. It will be a materialist politics to be

10 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 108.
11 McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 231.

sure, but also at the same time an immaterial or idealist war in which that old specter of the "thought crime" will certainly rear its ugly head again, and people will be put in jail for ideas and forms and scripts and scriptures (which is already happening in and around the new regime of digital copyright and the aggressive policing of immaterial property rights). And perhaps the future is already here, as the "source fetishists" are already running rampant, be they the champions of the open source movement, or those bioprospecting for new genetic sources deep within the Amazon jungle, or those mining for consumer essences deep within the Amazon web site.

What this means for criticism is another question altogether. The determining aspect of the dialectic today is not so much contradiction as such or synthesis or negation or even the group of terms related to becoming, process, or historicity, but rather that of the asymmetrical binary, a binary so lopsided that it turns into a kind of policed monism, so lopsided that the subjugated term is *practically nonexistent*, and that synthesis itself is a mirage, a mere pseudo technique floated with the understanding it will be recouped, like a day trader floating a short term investment. As Godard famously said: this is not a just image, this is just an image. So if anything can be learned from the present predicament it might be that a *practical nonexistence* can emerge from a being that is practically nonexistent, that subtractive being ($n - 1$) might be the only thing today that capitalism cannot eventually co-opt.

To end, we shall not say that there is a new blackness. We shall not ratify the rise of the obscure and the fall of the transparent. But do not decry the reverse either. Simply withdraw from the decision to ask the question. Instead ask: what is this eternity? What is this black box--this black bloc--that fills the world with husks and hulls and camouflage and crime? Is it our enemy, or are we on the side of it? Is this just a new kind of nihilism? Not at all, it is the purest form of love.