



# The Sovereignty of the World: Towards a Political Theology of Modernity (After Blumenberg)

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“Acute eschatology is the equivalent of the obsessional neurosis whose universal effect Freud described with the phrase, ‘at last the whole world lies under an embargo of impossibility,’” writes Blumenberg in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (LMA, 67–8). To place the (modern) world under an embargo of impossibility is, for Blumenberg, to question its legitimacy and the very logic of possibility inherent to it. That is, however, exactly the trajectory that our chapter seeks to open up from within Blumenberg’s text. As critical theory across disparate subfields seeks to challenge anew the modern

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world's underlying logics as, constitutively, a world of domination and exclusion, genealogical investigations of modernity—confined earlier to *Ideengeschichte*—gain a new urgency. Many of these logics, as contemporary political theology shows, also mark modernity as co-imbricated with Christianity and its theopolitical apparatus.<sup>1</sup> To trace the genesis of these logics is to trace the genesis of the modern world—of how it has been structured and how it continues to structure its subjects. We see the ongoing resurgence of interest in Blumenberg as tied to this tendency. However, despite this resurgence, Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* still remains to be re-read and re-configured through the lens of contemporary theoretical problematics. This chapter is, for us, a first step towards such a re-configuration. There is much to be learned from Blumenberg about the underlying logics of domination in modernity, often despite his own interest in legitimating the modern world. This goes, among other things, for Blumenberg's analysis of the entanglement of modernity with Christianity and the ideas of immanence, transcendence and sovereignty that emerge out of that entanglement—or out of the modern world's (and Blumenberg's own) attempt to break away from it.

From the political-theological perspective, turning to Blumenberg is important, insofar as it can help us think the co-imbrication of Christian and modern logics while still attending to key differences between them—a point that sometimes gets lost in all-too-quick identifications of modernity with Christianity or in postulating too smooth a continuity between them, as in standard theories of immanentization or secularization. At the same time, the point is not to mount a secularist defence of modernity, but to think, with and against Blumenberg, both what is shared between Christianity and modernity and, in a more nuanced way, what changes in the transition between the two. In particular, as we shall see, modernity's form of investment in the world—its identification of the world with the totality of what is possible and producible—at once inherits and transforms the Christian form of worldly investment, generating new logics of futurity, immanence and transcendence, as well as a new world: a world of endless productivity, alienation, work, globalization, exploitation and racialization, a world recognizable as characteristically modern.

For Blumenberg, while in late-medieval nominalism the inexhaustible totality of possibility was identified with God, the move of modernity is to identify this totality with the world, in relation to which the modern

<sup>1</sup>For a general mapping of this problematic, see Kirill Chepurin and Alex Dubilet, "Immanence, Genealogy, Delegitimation: German Idealism and Political Theology," in *Nothing Absolute: German Idealism and the Question of Political Theology*, ed. Kirill Chepurin and Alex Dubilet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

subject asserts itself. We will argue that Blumenberg's logic of the self-assertion of the subject involves the actualization of possibilities inherent in the world, a framework in which the world itself (re)occupies a position that is constitutively transcendent, even though Blumenberg frames modernity as an overcoming of transcendence via the immanence of "human self-assertion". Modernity, we contend, reoccupies the sovereignty of God with that of *the world*. The logic of possibility and actualization that makes the modern world possible functions, furthermore, as the logic of legitimation, in which the subject, the world and the modern age itself find their new justification, and through which they overcome the perceived Gnostic threat: the threat of the illegitimacy, even the downfall, of the world. Blumenbergian sovereignty thus converges with the Schmittian, so that the two may be seen as working jointly to establish and uphold a (transcendent) order—the order of the world.

#### OVERCOMING GNOSTICISM, INVESTING IN THE WORLD

*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* makes a powerful case for the autonomy of modernity with regard to the preceding Christian epoch—but it also emphasizes at least one continuity between the two, which can be framed via what Blumenberg casts as their common enemy: Gnosticism. Indeed, for such a painstaking work, Blumenberg's most succinct and programmatic definition of modernity in the book is rather idiosyncratic, even cryptic: "The modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism" (*LMA*, 126). The Christian age is the first (and ultimately failed) attempt at such an overcoming. Far from being external, this opposition to Gnosticism structurally defines both epochs as these epochs' shared *task*, thereby creating an antagonistic continuity between Christianity and modernity. What is at stake in this shared opposition?

It is, to put it simply, the Gnostic *refusal of investment in the world* that both Christianity and modernity oppose. This refusal is, in fact, what "Gnosticism" for Blumenberg indexes—coupled with the idea of God (and, accordingly, salvation) as absolutely alien to the world and irreconcilable with it. In this sense, Gnosticism operates as a generic and trans-historical term beyond its initial function as an umbrella concept for early Christian-adjacent heresies that variously conceive the creator of the world (known as the demiurge) as malevolent and, by extension, the world as illegitimate. Instead, Gnosticism names an operation of the refusal of the world, in which all guarantee and purposefulness of this world's reality,

and all sense of this world as worthy of being upheld and invested in, disappears.<sup>2</sup>

This operation is at work already in the Jewish apocalypticism that early Christianity sought to overcome. The apocalyptic demands the immediate end of the world, refusing investment in the world's continued existence. This end is immediate in the sense of not being mediated by the world and not going through it; there is no work of or in the world—no work of history—to be done before this end can arrive. The end is, instead, imminent, demanded *right now*. This means, however, that the world as such is stripped of all investment and legitimacy—as is worldly power. But as Christianity found itself needing to explain the world's continued existence, it was also establishing itself just as such a power. As a result, it needed to justify not the end of the world, but its prolongation. Therefore, already in its early eschatological overcoming of Jewish apocalypticism, and then in its opposition to Gnosticism, as Blumenberg shows in a chapter with the telling title “Instead of Secularization of Eschatology, Secularization by Eschatology”, Christianity makes the move of *postponing* the end of the world and salvation—making room for and justifying the world *in* its not-yetness, between creation and redemption.<sup>3</sup> The very concept of “world” names this continued justification of the state of things, the structural not-yet: “What the term ‘world’ signifies itself originated in that process of ‘reoccupying’ the position of acute expectation of the end” (*LMA*, 47). The world becomes the work of redemption in a constitutively deferred eschatological horizon.

In this, a kind of “secularization” occurs—an investment in and stabilization of the world, allowing for a separate age to emerge and to hold its ground (even if its theological status remains merely preliminary or transitive), and thus, among other things, for the establishment of the Christian Church as the institution *of* the not-yet that is the world—as the institution “stabilizing” this not-yet (*LMA*, 44). As it continues to oppose Gnosticism in its various guises, Christianity goes on to further strengthen its investment in the world. The first overcoming of Gnosticism consists precisely in this: in the suppression of the Gnostic heresy and the establishment both of the worldly authority of the Church and its ontological,

<sup>2</sup>For the Gnostic, “the world deserved destruction” (*LMA*, 131).

<sup>3</sup>It is not coincidental that Gnosticism “disputed the [Christian] combination of creation and redemption” (*LMA*, 129), since Christianity justified the world precisely as what takes place between the two.

theological and cosmological paradigms. This overcoming, however, comes at a fateful cost. There emerges a constitutive tension or “ambivalence” (LMA, 484) at the heart of Christianity, owing to which medieval Christianity, culminating in nominalism, will ultimately fall apart: a tension between investment in the world and investment in salvation, or the end of the world.

Despite the tendency towards investment in the world, the work of redemption still remains, in the Christian epoch, fundamentally *not* the work of the human subject. As Blumenberg points out, within the medieval Augustinian framework of original sin, the human was considered to be responsible for (the condition of) the world. This responsibility was, however, defined in a way that resulted in a “renunciation of any attempt to change” the world, still less to master it (LMA, 136). The evil of the world was due to the original, free human sin, so that, now, the human could not by her efforts escape this fallen condition, and only the transcendent grace of God could bring about salvation. Augustine’s ultimate motivation was that of justifying the world, *contra* Gnosticism: he wanted to secure the justice and justification of God by introducing human freedom in the form of original sin, thus absolving God from the Gnostic accusation that he was responsible for evil in creating this wretched cosmos (LMA, 133). This Augustinian freedom at once exacerbated the tension between divine grace and the current state of the world, and tied the human to this (fallen) state even further. There was no real work on the world that the fallen human could do, no real possibility available. Directed towards a future that was fundamentally not-yet, humanity must only *accept* the world and the divine work of redemption.

In Blumenberg’s account, this (first) overcoming of Gnosticism was neither permanent nor fully successful. Christianity, one could say, did not invest in the world fully enough—precisely because the balance still had to remain theologically tipped in favour of divine transcendence and salvation. It is through this gap that Gnosticism persisted as a threat, and the tension already present in early Christianity between worldly investment and the (more Gnostic) apocalyptic demand continued to exist. With the intellectual developments of medieval nominalism, the tension comes to the fore and ultimately snaps. For Blumenberg, nominalism—exemplified by thinkers like William of Ockham, Nicholas of Autrecourt and Peter d’Ailly—indexes a kind of implicit recrudescence of the Gnostic attitude, the refusal of investment in or relation to a world that is utterly

unfathomable. It is not until the Gnostic tendencies in nominalism are overcome that modernity will arrive in the fullness of its legitimacy.

Blumenberg's treatment of various nominalist thinkers is complex, but the fundamental reason for nominalism's fall into Gnosticism is simple. For the nominalist theologians, God's sovereign power was radically absolute (*potentia absoluta*) and his will unable to be constrained by any relation to order, regularity, or law. This "late medieval theological absolutism", with its hypertrophy of "the theological predicates of absolute power and freedom", was therefore "not concerned with the reality of the world and its significance for human consciousness but [solely] with preserving the full range of God's possibilities" (*LMA*, 159). God's absolute and "unlimited sovereignty" was here identified with the totality of *possibility*, infinite and inexhaustible (*potentia* is not only power but possibility<sup>4</sup>). This late-medieval God was, in fact, so omnipotent as to become completely *alien* to consciousness. There was no glimpsing into the unfathomable will of the divine, no analogy with the human, so transcendent God had become. God now had *all* the possibility to himself, which the human could not access. All that remained for the human was to exist in a world that this alien God had created, without the prospect, not just of changing it, but even of knowing how it worked, as it were, "in itself". This led ultimately, for Blumenberg, to the waning of the importance of divine transcendence, which came to be radically separated from the life of the subject in the world. As we will see, despite (or rather because of) this separation, the contradictions of nominalism's Gnostic tendencies ultimately generated a newly legitimated and autonomous investment in or "attention to the world" (*LMA*, 505). In insisting on the absoluteness of divine sovereignty, nominalism paradoxically paved the way for the sovereignty of the world.

### THE COUNTERWORLD, OR THE BIRTH OF MODERNITY OUT OF NOMINALISM

Where the previous theological architecture of orthodox Christianity had tried to find a balance between the transcendence (and thus sovereignty) of God and his purposes for the world, late-medieval nominalism destroyed any analogy or even relation between Creator and creation. Consequently,

<sup>4</sup>"The concept of *potentia absoluta* implies that there is no limit to what is possible ... [T]o the *potentia absoluta* [of God] there corresponded an infinity of possible worlds" (*LMA*, 153, 160).

human knowledge of reality was radically put in question. Since God could do whatever he willed, and this will was unfathomable to the human mind, God's will—and thus the world—became absolutely *contingent*.<sup>5</sup> There was, in this framework, no sufficient reason to be established for the world's workings, and no certainty about them. Since God's will was absolutely alien and contingent, and thus God's reasons for creating the world and the way the world functioned in itself, reality too was perceived as contingent and as alienated from the human mind and its existential concerns. The nominalist “intensification of transcendence” was accompanied by a “resignation with respect to immanence”, i.e., in Blumenberg's terms, to the world (*LMA*, 486). The situation out of which modernity originated is marked for Blumenberg by a fundamental uncertainty about reality and an “intense consciousness of insecurity” (*LMA*, 163). The guarantee of reality was disappearing from view and from under one's feet: as created by the alien God, the world itself became alien, contingent, “groundless” (*LMA*, 163).

This absolute alienation of God from the world resulted in a general “*Telosschwund*”, a disappearance of any identifiable purpose inherent in the world (*LMA*, 206), and a concomitant loss of what Blumenberg calls the “human relevance” of the credibility of transcendence and salvation (*LMA*, 137). According to Blumenberg's story, as we have seen, this hypertrophy of the transcendence of the nominalist God, even to the point of “hiddenness”, harboured a return of the Gnostic tendency: “The Gnosticism that had not been overcome but only transposed returns [in nominalism] in the form of the ‘hidden God’ and His inconceivable absolute sovereignty” (*LMA*, 135). There was thus here a convergence of sovereignty, transcendence and possibility, all located in the will of the hidden God. At the same time, on the other side of this divide or from the point of view of human finitude, there was another convergence: that of alienation and contingency, also bound to the absolute divine will—but transposed onto the world. As a result, to the hidden God, there corresponded the hidden world, appearing as alienated and absolutely contingent.

Accordingly, the second overcoming of Gnosticism had to overcome this alien God and the alienation from the world-in-itself that it entailed. To that purpose, nominalist thinkers gradually set the stage, in opposition to the fundamentally unknowable divine reality, for what Blumenberg

<sup>5</sup>As Blumenberg claims, only after nominalism could “the world's form [be conceived] as contingent” (*LMA*, 156).

terms the *counterworld*—the world as it appears to the human and as the human can navigate and deal with it: “Deprived by God’s hiddenness of metaphysical guarantees for the world, man constructs for himself a counterworld of elementary rationality and manipulability” (*LMA*, 173). Contingency is, after all, a kind of possibility, too. What is contingent—what could be otherwise—can also be seen as manipulable, as long as this contingency can be understood as subject to some sort of “elementary rationality”. This rationality may not correspond to God’s real (unfathomable) will and the world’s real (unfathomable) workings, but as long as *some* sort of rationality to the world’s contingency can be established, the human should be able to get by in this world.

This shift towards altering the world (by transforming it into a manipulable counterworld) initially appears for Blumenberg not as a drive to mastery, but simply as a minimal “self-defense”, essentially the last resort against the disorder of existential and metaphysical insecurity (*LMA*, 191)—a crucial motif in Blumenbergian anthropology, which he tends to transpose onto the logic of the history of ideas: desire for order and control, for rationality and manipulability, as springing from the more minimal need for security and defence. This mechanism is generally, for Blumenberg, characteristic of human self-assertion, and the construction of the counterworld in nominalism serves precisely the purpose of defending the human against the alienness of God and of reality. A reality that is absolutely alien is perceived as *threatening*, provoking the fundamental need for safety vis-à-vis an “indifferent and ruthless” world (*LMA*, 182). As a result, theoretical and practical interest turns, in nominalism, towards what is “humanly relevant”—towards an interest not in how God-created reality works in itself, but in what the human mind could make of its workings. The human may not possess any real possibility (which belongs to God)—but as long as there can be discovered a mechanism of dealing with the world’s contingency in a consistent, rational manner, the human will possess a guarantee of reality, however limited or phenomenal, that the hidden God is incapable of providing. Indeed, modernity will come to realize that “a hidden God is *pragmatically* as good as dead”, with the result that the human is released to engage in a “restless taking stock of the world” and the possibilities it provides (*LMA*, 346; translation modified). The counterworld is being constructed, crucially, in a de facto opposition to the divine: as a human world divorced from the transcendent divine possibility and from transcendent salvation.

The elementary rationality in which the human mind could place its trust despite the metaphysical contingency of reality was, for the nominalists, mathematical. Underlying the new view of the world as manipulable are a complex set of philosophical developments that formulate the quantification and measuring of nature. In opposition to the divine totality of possibility, the human seeks *another* kind of possibility, which the counterworld could claim for itself: possibility qua manipulability, the possibility of dealing with and mastering reality. Seeing as the world “no longer possessed an accessible order” (*LMA*, 171), effort gets redirected towards dealing with what *is* humanly accessible, manipulable and ultimately producible—and mathematics, in contrast to the qualitative Aristotelian physics, provides the perfect instrument.<sup>6</sup> Mathematical quantification is best able to deal with contingency because it is, in principle, “useable in any possible world” (*LMA*, 164). Once again, then, we see how the contingency that was a source of alienation becomes a spur, even an instrument, of human self-assertion.

This counterworld is not only subject to rationality and manipulability, but also, crucially, mastery: “The more indifferent and ruthless nature seemed to be with respect to man, the less it could be a matter of indifference to him, and the more ruthlessly he had to materialize, for his mastering grasp, even what was pre-given to him as nature, that is, to make it ‘available’ and to subordinate it to himself as the field of his existential prospects” (*LMA*, 182). The “mastering grasp” of the human is presented here as a necessary response to the alienated world and an alien God—a need to provide the world with some kind of order. Counterintuitively, then, mastery arises out of the evacuation of truth or knowledge about God’s infinitely sovereign will, his intentions or laws for creation. One example here is the way Blumenberg understands the principle of Ockham’s razor: instead of “reconstruct[ing] an order *given* in nature”, it “reduce[s] nature forcibly to an order *imputed* to it by man” (*LMA*, 154). The forcible and ruthless character of man’s production and domination of reality’s order is crucial here, and will become fundamental to modernity. The contingency of reality and its concomitant indifference to the human, its radical absence of care, is perceived as a threat and so has to be countered *with* violence, aimed at subduing and regularizing the substrate of the world.

<sup>6</sup>“The ontological replacement of the category of substance by the category of quantity had indeed established the ideal of handling all possible problems by calculation” (*LMA*, 348).

The materialization of nature is a part of the same development. “Reduction of the world to pure materiality”, Blumenberg writes, is “not primarily a theoretical proposition ... but rather a postulate of reason *assuring itself of its possibilities in the world* – a postulate of self-assertion” (*LMA*, 209, emphasis added; cf. 151). In this, we see the (humanly relevant) idea of possibility gradually migrating from God to the (counter) world that the human is constructing—the world that is now coming to be seen as producible, as “open to man’s rational disposition” and to change (*LMA*, 151). This is the key component of the transition to modernity. Blumenberg frames this development essentially as a binary choice: the human could produce a counterworld of immanent self-assertion to compensate for the “groundlessness of Creation”, or else face the Gnostic resignation of an alienated transcendence (*LMA*, 154)—an option that would have been, per Blumenberg, outright *unbearable* for the human. In this way, the sovereign possibility of God begins to give way to the possibilities inherent in the world, which the human can take stock of, manipulate and master: an increasing investment in the world over and against divine transcendence, an investment that Blumenberg legitimates as existentially inevitable, thereby legitimating the modern world that it produces.

We can thus see a nexus taking shape in nominalism that will become autonomous in and as modernity: the nexus of alienation—possibility/producibility—mastery, associated with the counterworld that the nominalists construct. According to Blumenberg’s logic, alienation from the world and from God leads to the need to re-establish security, order and regularity through mastery and self-assertion, with possibility as the central crucial node. That is to say, insofar as the world is now grasped, altered, mastered and produced, it is done so as a world of possibility, as a “field of existential prospects” that the human must both “subordinate” and work to actualize. As Blumenberg summarily puts it: “what is no longer found ready as reality benefitting man can be interpreted as a *possibility* open to him” (*LMA*, 211). Possibility relates to and mediates the other terms in the nexus by holding out the promise of overcoming alienation through the mastery of the contingent reality.

Nominalism, then, sets the stage for modernity, in which the counterworld, the manipulable field of “this-worldly possibilities”, becomes the central focus of human activity (*LMA*, 151). In this way, the conjunction of possibility and self-assertion is formed within nominalism—as is the opposition to divine sovereignty, “to which ... man was no longer to

submit with humble resignation, but which he would rather oppose with a new epistemological conception of the possibilities left open to him even with this reservation” (*LMA*, 385). This opposition is, however, still limited *by* this reservation. For Blumenberg there is a limit to nominalism, marking it as not-yet modern: the primacy of divine transcendence. The secret of creation is still removed from the human—as are salvation and fulfilment. Nominalism still maintains “the theological decision in favor of the transcendent status of such fulfillment”, precluding its “general human accessibility” (*LMA*, 173). In addition, while nominalism denies “that the created world could be the equivalent of the creative power actualized in it”, it still does not grant this power to the human subject (*LMA*, 160), nor does it identify the world itself with the sovereign totality of possibility. Possibility still lies fundamentally with God, and the counterworld that the human produces is not yet the true reality.

In other words, the theoretical nexus that will become fundamental to modernity may be, in nominalism, in the process of formation, but it is still secondary, not yet autonomous (or, in Blumenberg’s terms, *legitimate*), still existing in the quasi-Gnostic shadow of the omnipotent divine sovereign. But with the turn to the modern age, transcendence loses credibility as a “possibility that is held out to man” and a renewed investment in the world occurs. A new possibility is now held out to man: possibility itself.

### THE SOVEREIGN POSITION OF THE WORLD

With the emergence of modernity, all possible positions become positions in the world (identified with the humanly manipulable counterworld constructed under nominalism) and the world itself (and not God) becomes the totality of possibility. In our reading of Blumenberg, this move—this reoccupation—does not simply happen in modernity, it *is* modernity, fully legitimated. The counterworld becomes the true world: a reality that is at once contingent (not defined by a pre-given divine order) and immanently producible (by the subject). In his contrast of nominalism and modernity, Blumenberg sets up an opposition between, so to speak, alien transcendence and human immanence. For him, this binary is self-evident; there is no other option available. The choice between the two is for him clear, as well. Faced with the “transcendent uncertainties” of an indecipherable God and an alienated reality that precludes all access to fulfilment or to existential security, the human invests in what is manipulable and

masterable—in the world of and as possibility (*LMA*, 468). This mediated relation of subject and world—the subject-world dyad—itself becomes the guarantee of reality: the only reality that is guaranteed to provide the subject with perfect certainty and security is the one that has been produced immanently *by* the subject. “The world must be regarded as producible if it is not certain that man can get by with what is given”—and if what is given is itself, at its core, uncertain and unreliable (*LMA*, 209). Fulfilment thereby also becomes a matter of production: the world in which the modern subject finds itself may be originally alien and contingent, but since this contingency is also grasped as possibility, it must be possible to produce a reality that would be the subject’s own—rational, known, familiar, controlled. This means seeing the world as a “*potential* for human production” (*LMA*, 199), as “a reality to be altered and produced in accordance with human purposes” (*LMA*, 209), a “worldly” reality now fully and self-evidently identified with possibility (*LMA*, 561). To produce is to actualize—to move from the current set of positions and possibilities to a new, future one: to produce the world is to produce the future.

Blumenberg’s key concept of the self-assertion of the subject, which defines the modern epoch, is premised on the subject-world dyad thus understood. Modern self-assertion, says Blumenberg, “means an existential program, according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him” (*LMA*, 138). The “historical situation” is contingent—and thereby *other* to the subject, alienated, in the sense of not being originally of the subject’s own making. This reality is the situation in which the subject finds itself; these possibilities are simply out there and the subject has no access to their origin, only to making use of them. Alienation from reality crucially persists in modernity from nominalism, becoming a constitutive characteristic of the modern age—an alienation from the modern world’s own Christian origin, upon the break with which it constitutively founds its legitimacy, thereby inscribing this gap into its structure of reality.

However, this reality is now also understood as “open”, as ripe with possibility that the human must discern and make use of. In other words, the starting point of modernity is the promise that the human can “deal with reality” all on her own. It is the new “horizon”, that “of the immanent self-assertion of reason through the mastery and alteration of reality” (*LMA*, 137). Modernity begins with reality as “a potentiality open to

man's rational disposition" (*LMA*, 151), to mastery and to change. Accordingly, the paradigmatic modern subject ("man", or perhaps Man) is, in this framework, one who can discern and grasp—make use of, actualize, master—possibility. In this, the alienation-possibility-mastery nexus that began in nominalism becomes, in our reading of Blumenberg's account, fully decoupled from divine transcendence. Modernity names for him self-assertion's becoming immanent and autonomous for the first time, its liberation from any tie to a transcendence that would delegitimize or restrict the autonomy of self-assertion by placing possibility outside of human production and actualization.

But what is the nature of this worldly immanence that Blumenberg posits? In producing a counterworld of possibility, the human takes on a creative power akin to that of the Gnostic demiurge, that figure considered by the Gnostics to be the variously bungling or malevolent creator of the false material world. Indeed, Blumenberg makes this connection himself, writing, for example, of the "demiurgic activity exercised by man upon the world", and the human's "demiurgic production" (*LMA*, 205, 209; cf. 216, 474). However, Blumenberg does not fully explore the conceptual ramifications of his strange recapitulation of the Gnostic framework. For under this framework, the demiurge is not the true sovereign; the real sovereign is the alien God, dwelling beyond in transcendence. That is, of course, exactly what Blumenberg seeks to avoid: modernity, for him, overcomes Gnosticism by collapsing the distinction between the true, otherworldly sovereign and the one who produces the world (here: the human as the demiurge), by identifying *this* world with the true reality.

Yet if we tarry with this Gnostic framework, retaining Blumenberg's suggestion that the human takes on a demiurgic role in modernity, who or what assumes the role of the true, transcendent sovereign? We claim it is *the world*. The world reoccupies God's transcendent position as the totality of possibility, so that, consequently, the immanent-transcendent apparatus that was a source of alienation does not disappear, but is instead transposed onto and ultimately *as* the world itself. The following passage, while particularly thorny even by Blumenberg's standards, provides an important view into this framework:

From melancholy over the unreachability of what was reserved transcendentally for the Deity, there will emerge the determined competition of the immanent idea of science, to which the infinity of nature discloses itself as the inexhaustible field of theoretical devotion [*Zuwendung*] and raises itself

to the equivalent of the transcendent infinity of the Deity Himself, which, as the idea of salvation, has lost its certainty. (*LMA*, 336; translation modified)

This passage contains *in nuce* the transition to modernity and the appearance of self-assertion as we see it, beginning with the alienation from transcendence and ending with the human seeking fulfilment (“salvation”) through dealing (scientifically) with a supposedly immanent world—“a restless taking stock of the world, which can be designated as the motive power of the age of science” (*LMA*, 346). Despite Blumenberg’s mention of a “*theoretical* devotion”, modern theory needs to be understood for him as subordinated to the practice of mastering and producing reality (e.g. *LMA*, 208–9). The world as the “field of theoretical devotion” coincides, in “the immanent idea of science”, with the field of the production and mastery of reality. The world as the totality of possibility is inexhaustible, as is the subject’s devotion to it—and it is now from the infinite possibilities inherent in the world that the subject awaits fulfilment. As Blumenberg puts it in his discussion of Giordano Bruno, this foundational figure of the new epoch, modernity “reoccupies the position of the sovereignty of the divine will with the necessity of the self-transfer of the divine into the worldly—and thus with the necessity of the identification of possibility and reality” (*LMA*, 561).

Like other thinkers, such as Charles Taylor, who see modernity as a turn towards immanence, Blumenberg’s modernity thus takes up the new scientific engagement with the “immanent” world after being detached from an unreachable transcendence. The transition out of the Middle Ages is framed by Blumenberg as a competition between resigned (“melancholy”) alien transcendence, where possibility is reserved for God, and a newly self-authorized human immanence that takes up the infinite possibility for itself. Yet, contra Blumenberg’s insistence on immanence winning this existential competition, transcendence does not disappear when the position of the transcendent Deity is reoccupied in modernity, because it is *the position itself that is transcendent*: the sovereign position of the transcendent totality of possibility. The world retains the structure of transcendence “equivalent” to that of the transcendent God, and with it, the alienation that transcendence produces. In defending his notion of self-assertion as immanent, Blumenberg might respond that the fact that the position of the world is transcendent, reoccupying what used to be the position of God, does not necessarily entail the transcendence of self-assertion itself, for the subject can never have access to possibility in its

entirety, finding itself instead, in its self-assertion, immanently “dealing with” possibilities in a contingent, limited situation. This is, however, precisely what needs to be problematized: Blumenberg’s normative idea that the modern subject “merely” orients itself in a particular situation, without recourse to a position or structure of transcendence—an idea inherent in Blumenberg’s frequent characterization of self-assertion as “minimal” or “modest”. In fact, transcendence is inscribed into the logic of modern self-assertion as its condition and is produced as its result.

This structural transcendence, and its concomitant alienation, has several interrelated aspects. First, it is precisely because the position of the totality of possibility is transcendent that the subject is alienated from the contingent reality-as-possibility in the midst of which the subject finds itself at the onset of modernity—never possessing this totality as such, but merely orienting itself within it, in a constitutive separation from this totality and its (hidden) origin. The immanence of self-assertion is premised on an original gap between the subject, as capable of discerning and making use of possibilities, and the world as the field of these possibilities, which the subject perceives as something contingent and other than itself. The subject discovers itself in a contingent reality that is not of the subject’s own making, proceeding from which the subject strives to produce a reality that would be mastered and under control. Furthermore, until the future comes in which the subject will have produced a reality that is fully its own, this gap will persist. This structures the subject’s immanent self-assertion as a striving and a gap, directing it towards a future that is producible but also, fundamentally, not here yet.

This future—the end goal of overcoming alienation and producing a fully mastered reality by actualizing possibilities to the fullest, which reoccupies the *telos* of salvation—is what modern self-assertion orients itself towards. As long as reality remains alienated, and not fully produced and controllable by the human, this *telos* persists *as* transcendent and alienated from the subject: the work of actualizing the possibilities inherent in the world is constitutively endless. Possibility is by definition something that is yet to become actual, or to be discarded in favour of actualizing an alternative possibility. Either way, possibility is inherently not-yet actualized. This is overwhelmingly so in the case of the process of actualization that is supposed to produce the world in its entirety—to exhaust the possibility whose inexhaustibility is inscribed into the very character of reality as contingent, and thus as always containing within itself a further set of possibilities. In this way, the full exhaustion of possibility cannot but transcend

(the very logic of) possibility. Blumenberg speaks, in this regard, of “self-assertion’s unending task” (*LMA*, 215). Even though “the mastery and alteration of reality” is the goal towards which self-assertion is directed, self-assertion remains immanent for Blumenberg insofar as it remains modest—that is, insofar as it does not make the leap to the transcendent future of a fully mastered reality, but deals rather, progressively and in small measurable steps, with the possibilities that serve immediate human needs in a given historical situation at a given moment. In this, such a future remains merely a regulative ideal, without falling into what Blumenberg criticizes as “overextensions” of self-assertion’s “authentic” immanent and modest character (*LMA*, 49; cf. 89). Such an ideal, however, remains constitutively transcendent, so that a double gap emerges: the original separation of the subject from the reality alienated from it, coupled with the subject’s constitutive separation from the goal of overcoming this alienation.

One may observe that at both ends of this gap, we find precisely the world as the totality of possibility—as the transcendent position from which the subject is alienated and which it strives to actualize—so that the subject and its striving exist *as* this gap between past and future, this tear in the world, through which the world does not merely remain static but reproduces its not-yet—or rather, through which the world remains *at once* in place (in its unreachable transcendent position) and constitutively not-yet. The not-yet is thereby perpetuated and transcendence redoubled. Traditional salvation of the soul may have, towards the end of the Middle Ages, become uncertain, but in modernity it has been replaced by a desire for actualization in a deferred future that is always “not yet”—a horizontal and temporal transcendence that constitutes self-assertion’s efforts. It is as and through this immanent-transcendent apparatus that the transcendent position of the world reproduces itself.

This work on the world constitutively transcends any individual subject, too, ultimately creating alienation *from* the process of self-assertion itself, precisely *as* (in Blumenbergian terms) modest, that is, as one that is endless and is not supposed to reach the fully actualized future. The problem with the alien, transcendent divine sovereign of nominalism was that he did not care for the subject—but does the modern world care? If the prospect of divine salvation ultimately lost relevance for consciousness because it became too alien, then why would the endless not-yet of the world fare

better?<sup>7</sup> After all, it takes unending, infinite time to actualize the possibilities inherent in reality, across subjects and across generations (*LMA*, 155; cf. 571). It takes immense energy and never-ending work to actualize it, too. All that for the sake of a future that is always possible but never *now*, so that the subject must continue to strive for it, doing “work in his particular situation for a future whose enjoyment he cannot inherit” (*LMA*, 35)—ultimately, for the sake of the (re-)production of the world. The modern subject may strive for fulfilment, but all it gets is more work, the immanence of self-assertion leading to the imperative of this work (of the world) as self-legitimizing, self-perpetuating and order-upholding.

Both Christianity and modernity thus, in Blumenberg’s account, overcome Gnosticism by investing in the (not-yet of the) world<sup>8</sup>—but only in modernity does this investment become *total*, so that there is nowhere to escape from the world: the position of transcendence, too, is occupied by it, as is the position of the end goal of all striving. This produces the necessity (the desire) that the world, this world, keep going—at any cost. Thereby, the modern world becomes what Blumenberg calls “the workplace of human exertion”—the “price”, as he puts it, of modern freedom (*LMA*, 200). It is this imperative of work and production that lies for Blumenberg at the basis of the modern process of technicization, in turn leading to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century industrialization (*LMA*, 225), and to the divisions and dominations that industrialization produced or strengthened. The regulative ideal (of the immanent and modest character of self-assertion) that alone was supposed for Blumenberg to “make history humanly bearable” by “mak[ing] every absolute claim untenable” (*LMA*, 35) itself lays absolute claim to the subject, binding it to the imperative of the production of reality and the movement of

<sup>7</sup>Bringing this logic up to the present, Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) registers an estrangement from the very process of self-assertion under contemporary capitalism, as structured by the promise or the possibility of producing a non-alienated existence: “the attrition of a fantasy, a collectively invested form of life, the good life”. “[A]s the blueprint has faded”, Berlant writes, this fantasy “has become *more* fantasmatic, with less and less relation to how people can live” (*ibid.*, 11), increasingly losing, as Blumenberg would say, relevance for consciousness.

<sup>8</sup>The point is *not* to say that the modern not-yet is a mere “secularization” of the Christian not-yet—but to see at once the origin of the former in and its specificity vis-à-vis the latter—and to see in both a (genealogically connected) apparatus of transcendent futurity and indefinite deferral.

actualization, the fulfilment of which is always deferred into a transcendent future.

Again, it is precisely the activity of self-assertion that defines modern subjectivity in the first place. If we think of the world as the regime of reality that endlessly reproduces and justifies itself through a distribution of possibility and actuality, and where the subject is the locus it reproduces itself *through*, then we could say that it is the world, and not the subject, that in modernity becomes sovereign. Modern subjectivity reveals subjection as its flip side: defined in its supposed *self*-assertion via the work on the totality of possibility that is the world, the modern subject becomes subject *to* the world. And if one is not subject to the world, then one is not a subject at all.

Crucially, this modern logic of subjectivation also produces, and legitimates, various specific (transcendent) forms of subjection, domination, exploitation and exclusion. If, in modernity, possibility becomes identified with the world, that means that possibility gets *distributed*, too, across different situations (and sites) in which subjects find themselves—geographically or across the globe, too. The idea of the distribution of and access to possibility remains unthought by Blumenberg, and yet the stakes here are considerable. Such an analytic provides a perspective on how the “workplace” that is the modern capitalist world becomes an overarching structure of domination—as well as on the logic of racialization. After all, where possibility is both *telos* and resource, to be competed for and over, access to it becomes unequal. Some get (or start) ahead in the race to accumulate and actualize it, others get left behind; still others do not have access to possibility at all. To master possibility, to get ahead in this race, is to occupy a position of power—over the external world, over other subjects and over those who, within this framework, are not considered subjects, as in the case of the enslaved. As Sylvia Wynter observes, employing Blumenberg’s concept of reoccupation: in the modern world, Blackness was “made to reoccupy the signifying place of medieval/Latin-Christian Europe’s fallen, degraded, and thereby *nonmoving* Earth” (emphasis added).<sup>9</sup> Blackness here is, one could say, that which does not take part in modernity’s movement of actualizing possibility—that which has no (and can have no)

<sup>9</sup>Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3 (3), 2003, 319.

possibility.<sup>10</sup> This exclusion of Blackness is thus constitutive of how the very categories of “impossibility *and* possibility in the form of a historical limit [*are*] produced as existence”, as Nahum Chandler writes.<sup>11</sup> Such is, for example, the (non-)place of Africa in Hegel’s philosophy of history, as what precedes the movement of actualization (of freedom) and cannot participate in it. Another German Idealist thinker, Schelling, explicitly configures racialization as the consequence of regarding the world as the totality of possibility and world-history as the process of actualizing it—so that those remaining at the lower stage (*Stufe*) of this movement are supposed to serve *as* mere possibility for the higher. The lower is, in fact, destined for Schelling to die out naturally upon coming into contact with the higher (as in the case of “the American natives”)—or to be put to use by the higher, as in the transportation of enslaved Africans to the New World, thereby saving the lower from world-historical abandonment and giving it the *possibility* to become part of something higher<sup>12</sup>—to become part of the movement of possibility itself. Death and slavery index the zero degree of the logic of possibility, and division through possibility, by way of which the modern world functions.

The earth itself cannot escape the world either. The modern conception of the world as a totality of possibility that must be worked on sets the stage for engaging nature as an exploitable, transformable resource, with self-assertion taking a “restless inventory” of the world’s possibilities (*Weltinventor*) and setting a programme for the “domination of nature” that Blumenberg sees as uniquely modern (*LMA*, 346; 182). With devastating ecological consequences, the nonhuman world comes to be seen as an “inexhaustible source of material”, full of possibilities that must be explored, expanded and exploited by self-assertion, from the depths of the earth up into the starry sky, and even the realm of the invisible (*LMA*, 474; 369).<sup>13</sup> This development is particularly connected with the natural philosophy of Francis Bacon, who considered his thought historically

<sup>10</sup> On Blackness as a “void of historical temporality”, see Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 38.

<sup>11</sup> Nahum Chandler, *X – The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 153.

<sup>12</sup> F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, Bd. II/1 (Stuttgart-Augsburg: Cotta, 1856), 509, 513–5.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *LMA*, 363: “the space in which the epoch pursues its curiosity about the world has its dimensions, its expanding width, height, and depth.” In other words, the totality of possibility identified with the world gets distributed along all three dimensions.

“due”, given that it coincided with what Blumenberg calls “the opening of the world by seafaring and trade” (*LMA*, 388).<sup>14</sup> In a sense, Bacon was correct, as long as one recognizes that Blumenberg’s “opening of the world” implies the opening up of the possibility of discovery and conquest, meaning the brutal European colonization of the New World, and as long as one understands the truth of “trade” as a nascent global capitalism propelled by the slave trade. The historical convergence of this view of nature as a field of possibility—“the inexhaustible field of theoretical devotion”—and the fact of Western global capitalist domination, extraction, colonization, racialization and enslavement that forms and is formed (and justified) by a conceptuality like Bacon’s is far from a coincidence. That is to say, the view of nature or the earth as a resource of possibilities to actualize occurs intimately alongside the conversion of other groups of humans into a resource, humans who, while closed to possibility or constitutively lagging behind, become themselves a resource for work and actualization.<sup>15</sup> The modern world is, one could say, the earth converted to possibility.

The world as the totality of possibility thus reveals itself to be a distribution of power and hierarchical order. This is also where the sovereignty of the world, and the logic of modern “immanent” self-assertion, converges—despite Blumenberg’s explicit opposition to Schmitt—with the Schmittian-Hobbesian (transcendent) sovereignty. Precisely because Blumenberg tends to avoid thematizing self-assertion in relation to sovereignty, the rare instance where he does is all the more telling. The subject’s transfer of right to the absolute sovereign ruler in the Hobbesian contract is, for Blumenberg, not a secularization of God’s sovereignty (as in Schmitt), but an exemplary instance of the self-assertion of reason (*LMA*, 219). In Hobbes, we might recall, the state of nature is configured as absolutely contingent and lawless, an alien, dysfunctional chaos, in which every subject is an absolute sovereign unto itself, and therefore no sovereignty and no rule actually exist; hence the necessity of transitioning to a civil state—of instituting, and upholding, the political world. In

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *LMA*, 389: “The image of the contemporary voyages of discovery dominates Bacon’s thought.”

<sup>15</sup> On enslavement as geo-racial “resource” in and of modernity, see Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). On the colonized and women’s bodies and labour becoming “natural resources” beginning in early-modern capitalism, see Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

Blumenberg, this is analogized to the general “demiurgic” creation, in early modernity, of the world as the site of rational self-assertion. Just as early scientific modernity emerged through self-assertion seizing the alienated cosmos of nominalism as a field of possibilities, in the political realm it is the alienated “chaos of absolute rights [in the posited state of nature]... that enables [reason] to grasp the opportunity of self-assertion ... by transferring the many absolute rights to one absolute right – that of the ruler” (*LMA*, 219). In each case, this gesture indexes self-assertion’s need for order and justification, no matter “the doubtfulness of the achieved and justified order and of the resulting concept of order”, for “any order at all’ [is better than none]” (*LMA*, 219). This existential need for order is put forth and produced over against the chaos, disorder and alienation of the pre-political state of nature, likened by Hobbes to the chaos of matter, with its “constructive potentiality” (*LMA*, 220). Thereby, the political world becomes producible in a way comparable to the material world. If the Hobbesian state of nature maps, per Blumenberg, onto the late-nominalist state of alienation (*LMA*, 218), then the overcoming of that state coincides structurally with the overcoming of nominalism and Gnosticism, and thus with the condition of modern self-assertion as such.

In other words, this logic of sovereignty—which for Blumenberg extends beyond Hobbes to other regimes of modern governance like liberalism (*LMA*, 220)—exemplifies, in the political sphere, the general modern logic of subjection and world-investment. Political order needs to be instituted as part of the overall world-order, its producibility and its regularity, so as to make possible the work on and of the world. Self-assertion structurally needs a sovereign because it needs order, or the guarantee of reality. If the subject were really to assert *itself, without limit*, in this contingent, alienated world in which the subject finds itself at the outset of modernity, this would lead, as in the Hobbesian state of nature, to “the unlimitedness and unlimitability of [the subject’s] claim to everything at all” and to “perfect chaos” (*LMA*, 218–9). This serves to show, yet again, that Blumenbergian self-assertion carries with it the requirement of a transcendent order, political and ontological, so it can function as an investment in (and justification of) the world and is not directed *against* it. The limited, “modest” character of modern self-assertion on which Blumenberg so emphatically insists thereby reveals subjection and (transcendent) order as its necessary conditions. The claim to power—“to everything at all that [the subject] finds within his reach”—of course remains within this order, too, but channelled into the work of

maintaining the world instead of disrupting it. In this way, it becomes the modern claim to the possibility of mastery and domination of reality. Subjective self-assertion and political sovereignty, Blumenberg and Schmitt, function together to uphold the stability of this order and this position.<sup>16</sup>

### CONCLUSION: LIFE AGAINST THE WORLD

The fear of the absence, refusal or unjustifiability of the world is shared by Blumenberg and Schmitt. The imperative that *the world must be* is, of course, just as central for the Christian overcoming of apocalypticism and Gnosticism as it is for modern investment in the world (Gnosticism's second overcoming). For if there is no world, or if it has no legitimacy, then the entire logic of self-assertion falls apart, and the ground and *telos* of the subject's striving dissolve into air. If, however, this world that Christianity and modernity have jointly produced—this world that is violent, contingent, exhausting—is to be delegitimated, then it might be worthwhile to dwell on the transitory moment of alienation and disorder, grasped by Hobbes and Blumenberg alike as the condition that they seek to foreclose. Thinking alienation and disorder as *decoupled* from the supposed necessity of the (Christian-modern) world elicits what would need to be affirmed against the logics of transcendence that set the subject endlessly to work and to reproduce the world—and what needs to be refused so as not to fall back into these logics.

What needs to be refused in the first place is the all-too-often implied inevitability of the modern world and the modern structure of reality, even in those accounts that are otherwise critical of the Christian-modern. Despite his sense for historical contingency, Blumenberg, too, is keen to affirm the necessity of the modern world bordering on the teleological—no wonder that modernity is considered by him to be the decisive overcoming of Gnosticism, inevitably finishing the task that remained unfinished in Christianity. Modern self-assertion, for Blumenberg, was the “only possibility left to man”, the only alternative in the face of the alienation that the Gnostic tendency represents (*LMA*, 191; cf. 468)—the alternative of what Blumenberg sees as immanence against the alienation

<sup>16</sup>On how Schmittian sovereignty serves to uphold the order of the world, see Daniel Colucciello Barber, “This, Now-Here, No-Where,” in Chepurin and Dubilet, *Nothing Absolute*.

of transcendence. In the choice set up between alienated transcendence and the immanence of self-assertion, it is only the latter that could, for Blumenberg, provide the guarantee of reality, the order and security of world-production and world-investment. The Gnostic imperative of “the downfall of the world”, inhabiting what is absolutely alien vis-à-vis the world, appears unbearable or “intolerable” to Blumenberg (*LMA*, 131)—an “obsessional neurosis” that places the world “under the embargo of impossibility” (*LMA*, 67–8), in response to which the human must take up the demiurgic role and invest in the world.<sup>17</sup>

However, is it not the modern world itself that becomes *unbearable*, exclusionary and precarious—an endless workplace, whose burdens we are never done bearing? What if, therefore, the binary that Blumenberg advances at the origin of modernity is a false one? In the binary between the impossible and the possible, the threatening and the secure, the choice for order, which Blumenberg absolutizes, was, after all, the choice for a specific *kind* of order produced by, in and as modernity—an order born out of the exclusion and exploitation of forms of being deemed too disorderly or too different. What if one could rather think an affirmation or inhabitation of the disorderly and the impossible, or that which, vis-à-vis the modern world, has no possibility? What if the alien could function not as an alien transcendence, but what Fred Moten has termed an “alien immanence”<sup>18</sup>? This would involve, to reclaim Blumenberg’s dismissive phrase, a *life against the world*,<sup>19</sup> a choice to inhabit immanently the downfall of the world against its order and its apparatus of exclusion and subjection. Hobbes and Blumenberg think of disorder and chaos as a hyper-individualistic, brutal state (a conception that is itself part of modernity’s narrative), so as to pit the perceived evils of such a state theodically against the good of the world-order.<sup>20</sup> However, could the choice for

<sup>17</sup> Fourteen years before Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy*, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]) employed the same Freudian concept of “obsessional neurosis” to describe the (non)position of Blackness in the world (42). This common Gnostic refusal of the world-order seen as neurosis must be thought alongside Fanon’s later call, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1961]), for “an agenda for total disorder” (2). We acknowledge here Anthony Paul Smith’s ongoing work around this question in Fanon.

<sup>18</sup> Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 63.

<sup>19</sup> “The world ... demanded a decision between trust and mistrust, an arrangement of life with the world rather than against it” (*LMA*, 131).

<sup>20</sup> On Blumenberg’s project as a theodicy, see Willem Styfhals, *No Spiritual Investment in the World: Gnosticism and Postwar German Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

disorder be instead a choice made from within the (under)commons of afflicted life, a choice already made by the multitudes of those disproportionately subjected and alienated so as to produce the order of the modern world? To think the unbearability of the world that sets subjects endlessly to work—though always differentially and unequally—is to refuse the transcendence instituted by and as the modern world, to refuse to convert alienation into possibility and mastery, and to dwell with an immanence that is alien to the world of possibility, that precisely *does* embargo the world in the name of the impossible and demands its downfall.

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