

# THE VOID OF THOUGHT AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF HISTORY

Chaadaev, Bakunin, and Fedorov

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## 1 Introduction

This paper cuts across three different Russian thinkers in order to bring out a particularly fruitful, albeit unorthodox, trajectory common to them.<sup>1</sup> The conceptual terrain that we trace below is not restricted to these thinkers, but disturbs and preoccupies much of nineteenth-century Russian thought. This essay—as well as the larger, book-length project of which it is a part, *Nothing to Be Done: History, Immanence, and the Void in 19th-Century Russian Thought*—re-evaluates the standing of nineteenth-century Russian thinking by refracting it through the conceptual concerns of contemporary continental theory. Our essay follows the thought of each of the three figures—Pyotr Chaadaev, Mikhail Bakunin and Nikolai Fedorov—as a way of exploring the questions that they themselves considered decisive in relation to the task of thinking. At its most inventive, Russian philosophical thinking functioned fundamentally outside of professional philosophy and strictly philosophical divisions and genres—and was instead vitally concerned with questions such as ‘Where must thought begin?’, ‘What is it that thought must think?’, and ‘What is the place (or non-place) of thinking?’. And most significantly, ‘How might we conceptually relate to the world and its history, without justifying the violent and dominating logics that underlie them?’.

The resulting trajectory of thought is profoundly ambivalent, caught between articulating an ungrounding of world history, on the one hand, and more familiar philosophical-historical modes of its justification, on the other—between a thought that erupts *against* the modern world and its inherited modes of thought, and a thought that remains within their boundaries and logics. In our reconstructions, we seek to make visible this fundamental ambivalence, while also underscoring the unique and rebellious element within each figure. What follows is thus an immanent as well as a speculative re-reading, which delineates a complex theoretical terrain arising out of a common attempt to think the violence of the world and its history—and to think affirmatively that which world history forecloses and declares to be nothing. As we will see, this will entail the emergence of unorthodox figures of futurity and the common, as well as an unorthodox image of thought.

## 2 Nothingness without history: Russia and the void<sup>2</sup>

There is something paradoxical, perhaps even ironic, in the fact that Pyotr Chaadaev's (1794–1856) *Philosophical Letters*—epistolary meditations on Russia, religion, and world history written in French at the end of the 1820s—have often been considered to mark the beginning of the most fruitful period of Russian thought. After all, what they affirmed was precisely the barrenness, even nothingness, of the territory bearing the name 'Russia', proclaiming it to be a world-historical void without any participation in the course of the providential history culminating in the Christian-European world, without any thought or life to call its own, without a past or the possibility of a future. A text of singular force, the *Philosophical Letters* enacted a displacement of Russia into the groundless void that annuls the logic of historical temporality:

We [Russians] have never moved in concert with other peoples; we do not belong to any of the great families of humankind; we are neither of the West nor of the East, and we possess the traditions neither of one nor of the other. Situated as though outside of time, we have not been touched by the universal education of humankind. This admirable interconnection of human ideas over successive centuries, this history of the human spirit, which has led it to its present state in the rest of the world, have had no effect upon us. [...] No one [here] has a fixed sphere of existence; there are no proper habits, no rules at all for anything. [...] Everything passes, flows away, leaving no trace either outside or within you. [...] We have nothing of our own to serve as a basis for our thinking [...] [I]solated by a strange destiny from the universal movement of humanity, we have taken in nothing of the traditional ideas of humankind. [...] Our memories reach back no further than yesterday; we are, so to say, strangers to ourselves. We move through time in such a singular manner that, as we advance, the past is irretrievably lost to us.<sup>3</sup>

(1991a: 89–92, 323–26)

No wonder that upon the publication of this letter in Moscow in 1836, a public uproar ensued, leading Chaadaev to be declared a madman by the emperor, Nicholas I—but also provoking Russian thought to a hitherto unprecedented degree, making it impossible for it not to confront the proclaimed nothingness of Russian history and existence.

The position of Chaadaev the speaker in these letters is ambivalent, alternating between a Russian 'we' and a European or world-historical 'we'—but insofar as Chaadaev, a Europeanized Russian nobleman writing in French, is speaking for Russia and as himself Russian, he is speaking on behalf of the void that is absolutely excluded from history. That is to say, not only politically, but also theoretically, declaring Russia a non-place in space and time, a singular nothingness without history or topos, so as to speak of an (impossible) 'we' that inhabits this nothingness, was an audacious move on Chaadaev's part. It introduced, and gave voice to, a negativity completely decoupled from the logic of history and historical possibility; a negativity that is completely void, indexing, as it were, withoutness as such. In modern philosophy of history prior to Chaadaev there had, of course, been sites of world-historical exclusion—such as, infamously, Africa in Hegel. Hegel himself did not, however, speak on behalf of Africa; and even that exclusion was arguably less radical, relegating the African continent to a prehistoric past—a place more easily comprehensible vis-à-vis the logic of world history. In Chaadaev, Russia becomes the name for the absolute exclusion from the logic of history—even from the position of pre-history—a void without relation or attachment to the world-historical whole,

so much so that it indicates a quasi-cosmological exclusion, of not belonging 'to any of the systems of the moral universe' (1991 a: 198, 433). This nonbelonging and nonattachment is what Chaadaev's text at once critiques and inhabits—a necessarily doubled vision. The ambivalence between the Russian and the European 'we' in the *Letters* should not, however, be considered a mere inconsistency. To even be able to speak of the 'we', of a nothingness for which nothing is proper and thus in which no national identity is possible, Chaadaev had to position himself at the parallax between the two.

This duality is, however, radically asymmetrical, so that, in a subversion of the standard logic of the binary, one term is fully annulled or voided, persisting in a nonrelation to the other. On this account, the term 'Russia' names the total absence of everything that 'Europe', or the European tradition, is; and given that the latter is, for Chaadaev, everything (that has been actual or possible within the world-historical logics of inheritance, tradition, and kinship), Russia can only be characterized as a nothingness without history, an a-topic, ungrounded site of absolute exclusion. Chaadaev diagnoses it as a state of exception: 'we are an exceptional people [*un peuple d'exception*]' (1991a: 93, 326)—but this exception indicates something more than merely historical distinctiveness of one nation from the broader set of European peoples. Rather than naming a national trait differentiating a specific nation, the exceptionality asserted by Chaadaev indicates an exception to the very structure of teleological space-time that unites self-enclosed national particularities across their differences, to the very structure, that is, of world history. It is precisely in moments when Russia and its people name the exception, the void, or nothingness—historically, morally, ontologically—that Chaadaev's discourse attains its inventive force. Put otherwise, Chaadaev's discourse on Russia is not a national thinking, but rather a thinking of nothingness as excluded from the historical and national ordering of humankind—an exception to the mechanisms that ensure its reproduction, accumulation, and continuity.

The (radically asymmetrical) duality of nothingness and world history suggests, however, two absolutely divergent trajectories to the question of what is to be done with this non-time and non-space. The *Letters* proffer a conservative solution to the problem, suggesting the necessity of overwriting the exception. Within this 'Westernizing' solution, the term 'Europe' (the solid body of the European tradition) seeks to consume the term 'Russia' (the non-place of nothingness), so that nothingness appears as a gap or lack to be re-incorporated into the universal unfolding of history. All thinking, including the thinking of the void, remains indelibly tethered to tradition and history, ultimately ensuring their continuity and universality at the expense of the void.

In contrast to the first trajectory, the second (fully expressed in Chaadaev's subsequent *Apologia of a Madman*) affirms the nothingness in its immanence, as inherent to itself and detached from all (historical, ontological, and narrative) determinations that would establish it as lack. Explicitly refusing the logics of tradition, reproduction, and memory, the *Apologia* sees in the void a kind of liberation from tradition. 'It should not be doubted that a great part of the universe is oppressed by their traditions, by their memories: let us not envy the constricted circle in which it flounders. Let us leave them to struggle with their inexorable past' (1991a: 301, 535). Indeed, being liberated from the logic of tradition allows for 'the immediate fulfilment of everything good' out of world-historical nothingness—and this fulfilment indicates a different futurity, one that does not merely arise out of the continuity of history. 'It is my deep conviction that we are called upon to resolve most of the problems of the social order, to accomplish most of the ideas that arose in the old societies, to decide on the most serious questions that occupy humankind' (1991a: 300, 534). The *Apologia* advances a novel and anti-traditionalist answer to the question 'What is to be done with the (Russian) void?'. The task is

to begin immanently from within the nothingness so as to suspend all tradition and history, and to advance a radically different logic of futurity—not a transcendent futurity, or one emerging out of a continuous process of development, but a futurity that arises as and in the (immanently real) excess of history. This future, moreover, is proposed as a *common* future, one that resolves all social issues by beginning from the excluded of history, from that which does not have a place or is the non-place vis-à-vis the world-historical thinking of tradition.

Here, (Russian) thinking itself becomes intimately imbricated with the a-topic nothingness, out of which it emerges and which it must think. This (im)properly Russian thought, beginning with Chaadaev, is a thinking of the void, aimed at delegitimizing the world as it has been created by the dominant modern logics of history and tradition. What is decisive for the trajectory of world-delegitimation that we are constructing in this essay, is not the name 'Russia'—but the very logic of a nothingness that is absolutely excluded from history, and the affirmation of this nothingness as the non-place of the common. In Bakunin and Fedorov, removed as their thought is conceptually from Chaadaev's, we will encounter a convergent affirmation, and a thinking *against* the world-historical whole, against the very thrust of historical thinking—though not always entirely free from its lures—in a way that permutes the problematic first established by Chaadaev.

### 3 Unnatural humanity—or, we have never been human

Mikhail Bakunin (1814–76) is commonly remembered as one of the founders of anarchism and an insurrectionary critic of the state. And while politically Bakunin certainly targets the state, his thinking is oriented around the broader concerns of transcendence and legitimation. Whereas the state is founded on acts of force, it is religion that essentially enacts legitimation. As Bakunin explains in his *Letters to the Comrades of the International Workingmen's Association of Locle and Chaux-de-Fonds* (commonly referred to as *Letters on Patriotism*) from 1869, religion 'has always sanctified violence and transformed it into right' (1895: 220).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Bakunin might well be considered the first critical antagonist of political-theological thinking in modernity, a thinker who construes the state and religion, their essences and operations, as partaking in a single, unified, bimodal machine of transcendence.<sup>5</sup> His thinking throughout, but especially starting with his middle period, takes this nexus as the target of savage polemics, and becomes a thinking seeking to delegitimize its sanctification and the force of its authority. This is something that was soberly identified by Carl Schmitt, who saw in Bakunin the culmination of a radical position that fought against transcendence upheld by the political-theological tradition of counter-revolutionary thought, of which Schmitt considered himself the heir.

Let us call to mind the portrait of Bakunin that Schmitt offers in his *Political Theology*:

Bakunin was the first to give the struggle against theology the complete consistency of an absolute naturalism [...] Bakunin's intellectual significance rests, nevertheless, on his conception of life, which on the basis of its natural rightness produces the correct forms by itself from itself. For him, therefore, there was nothing negative and evil except the theological doctrine of God and sin, which stamps man as a villain in order to provide a pretext for domination and the hunger for power. All moral valuations lead to theology and to an authority that artificially imposes an alien or extrinsic 'ought' on the natural and intrinsic truth and beauty of human life. The sources of such authority are greed and lust for power, and these result in a general corruption of those who exercise power as well as those over whom it is exercised. (1985: 64)

Bakunin is presented as a proponent of naturalism, which takes nature as good and to be affirmed in its immanence, in opposition to the deforming transcendence of God and the state. At stake, however, is not only nature as such, but human nature in particular: Schmitt draws a stark distinction between the political and theological (and ultimately, political-theological) thinking that takes man as essentially fallen and evil, a fact that necessitates and renders legitimate authority and order, and the tradition of thought, purportedly embodied by Bakunin, which takes human nature as essentially good (Schmitt 1985: 50, 55). Bakunin does in fact repeatedly delineate the contours—and shows himself a fiery enemy—of the tradition of metaphysicians, theologians, and politicians who justify authority by appealing to human sinfulness and wickedness. Yet the status of the position ascribed to him by Schmitt regarding the natural goodness of the human turns out to be, when one returns to Bakunin's texts, more complex than may have been expected.

Bakunin is certainly a naturalist in the broad sense insofar as he theoretically grounds the human in nature, rather than in a divine origin or in narratives of creation and fall. But this natural origin of the human, this grounding of human in nature, engenders the most bewildering of fascinations. Repeatedly in Bakunin's works, the point at which nature and the human coincide is identified with cannibalism [*l'anthropophagie*]: 'Human societies, do they not begin through cannibalism?' (1895: 230); and again: 'At the cradle of human civilization, we find cannibalism' (1895: 254). The same concern comes up in his more famous *God and the State*: 'What is more ancient and more universal than slavery? Cannibalism perhaps' (1970: 20).<sup>6</sup> Though tracing the natural origin of the human, Bakunin hardly assumes nature to be innocent or good; rather, it is defined by a kind of mutual devouring, which resembles a combination and intensification of the visions of Darwin and Hobbes. This natural war of all against all, at the moment of conjunction with the development of human history, becomes specifically human, and thus can take on the name cannibalism. For, 'the natural world is nothing but a bloody hecatomb, a dismal and frightening tragedy written with hunger' (Bakunin 1895: 248)—and the natural origins of the human are to be found therein.

Bakunin names this mutual devouring, this logic of slaughter and violence in the natural world, in an unexpected theoretical gesture, patriotism. In other words, he grounds patriotism in nature itself, as a natural passion, indeed an excessively natural [*trop naturelle*] one. Although it was 'man the speaking being [that] finally introduced the first word [*phrase*] into this struggle—and this word is patriotism', as a phenomenon, patriotism is grounded in the natural animal and plant world by means of two principles, those of nourishment and reproduction (Bakunin 1895: 229–30). Whereas nourishment concerns the conservation of the individual, reproduction concerns the constitution and perpetuation of families, groups, and species. They delimit, on two different levels, that of individuality and collectivity, the operations of the proper. Reproduction in particular, insofar as it defines the limits of a group, draws the line of demarcation between what is same and what is other. As Bakunin writes, it differentiates 'the great fatherland [*la grande patrie*]' from 'an absolutely strange world, hostile and condemned to destruction' (1895: 231–32); or again, 'It is the love of who and what is one's own [*des siens et du sien*] and hatred of everything that bears a foreign character [*étranger*]. Patriotism is thus a collective egoism, on one side, and war, on the other' (1895: 234). Although the patriotism of historical societies and political formations will add additional economic, political, and religious elements, such additions will never revoke its natural grounding, which acts to constitute the proper and the particular, whose very reproduction inevitably engenders violence and warfare. The logic of reproduction that allows for the proper and the particular to persist across generations, then, is a logic that underlies equally the natural world and the realm of human history.

Cannibalism is the point of conjunction between the history of humankind and the natural world of animality. It is a kind of root out of which human history, as a history of violence and domination, grows. Bakunin's naturalism produces a certain continuity, in which the violence indexed by cannibalism persists in mutated forms across world history. As he notes:

Human beings, omnivorous animals par excellence, began their history through cannibalism [*anthropophagie*]. Today they tend towards universal association [...] But between these two terms, what bloody and horrible tragedy! And we have not yet finished with this tragedy. After cannibalism came slavery, after slavery serfdom, after serfdom wage-labour, after which first the terrible day of justice is to follow, and later, much later, the era of fraternity. These are the phases through which the animal struggle for life is transformed gradually, in history, into the human organization of life.

(1895, 219–220)

Insofar as the logic of patriotism is deemed natural—this is the core of Bakunin's surprising theoretical manoeuvre in the *Letters on Patriotism*—and ultimately spans across the natural world and the world-historical development of humankind, we might say that nature and the transcendent apparatus of state and religion are conjoined. The latter does not break with the violent logic of the former. Rather, we see the violence of the natural world mutating across the world history in a series of 'phases'. This is hardly the portrait of naturalism that we saw alluded to in Schmitt's characterization of Bakunin. Indeed, as Bakunin writes: 'It is clear that, up to the current moment at least, humanity has not been an exception to the general law of animality that condemns all living beings to devour each other to live' (1985: 256). There has not been any exception to the general law of speciation and reproduction, no discontinuity with the history that has been produced continually up to the present. Whatever is to be freed from this, as an exception—'the era of fraternity [...] the human organization of life'—has never yet occurred. Nature has been a bloody struggle, and we have never properly escaped it.

At the same time, the gradualism of the stages or 'phases' of history—spanning from cannibalism to wage labour to the day of justice—carries with it the suggestion that the time of history is a time of amelioration, of gradual transformation. History appears as the process of humanization, the actualization of freedom, whose full form is still to come. We are confronted by a strange contradiction or ambivalence here: the trenchant antagonist of political-theological thinking, whose very orientation seeks to delegitimize the authority of the state and religion, is delineating a logic that justifies and legitimates the process of history, and thus the violence and transcendence that are an essential part of it. And this legitimating trajectory within Bakunin's thought appears in his other works, as well. In his *Federalism, Socialism, and Antitheologism* of 1867, we read the following: 'The entire history of man is thus nothing but his progressive separation from pure animality through the creation of his humanity' (1895: 85). The justificatory tendencies within this work go so deep that the radical atheist Bakunin will judge religion a 'historical necessity'—humanity's first and partial attempt of self-discovery (Bakunin 1895: 133).

If in the *Letters on Patriotism*, patriotism is positioned as a natural phenomenon, in *Federalism, Socialism, and Antitheologism*, it is religion that is explored as one. In the latter work, nature is taken as omnipotent, generating in natural beings a state of 'absolute dependence' permeated by 'fear', with no autonomy or independence possible. Here again, the human is grounded in nature; but in this case, it is thought itself, understood as the fundamental faculty of abstraction, that marks the genesis of the distinctly human. This faculty of abstraction is a capacity of elevation and transcendence, which allows for a separation from natural immediacy: the human is at once

continuous with nature, as a natural being, and discontinuous with it insofar as it exhibits the capacity to abstract from the ineluctable pressures of the natural world. Bakunin's discussion of abstraction takes place amidst a speculative reconstruction of the origins of religion (a dubious methodological undertaking which exhibits Bakunin's Enlightenment inheritance): 'What is the real essence of all religion? It is precisely this sentiment of absolute dependence of the momentary individual vis-à-vis eternal and omnipotent nature' (1895: 98). The feeling of absolute dependence is natural, but by means of abstraction, it becomes conscious and, thus, religion. Indeed, this originary operation yields, as its first result, 'the absolute abstraction'—God (1895: 121); and this God is judged to be 'a necessary error in the development of humanity' (1895: 86). Religion as a whole is justified as the originary step from animality to humanity: 'Through religion, the animal man, by exiting its bestiality, takes a first step towards humanity; but as long as it remains religious, it will never attain its goal' (Bakunin 1895: 134).

In fact, Bakunin traces how the operations of abstraction result in and legitimate the very modes of political-theological transcendence that come to dominate the human across history. Abstraction names the point that distinguishes, while conjoining, the natural and the human, thereby opening up the developmental path of history: the gradual historical process of the emancipation of humankind begins in the original (dis)continuity of abstraction and ensues by means of labour that transforms the natural world. That is to say, although abstraction is presented as what distinguishes the human from the purely natural, in a more profound sense, it also conjoins nature and history into one mechanism. And, it is this very apparatus of the natural and of the abstract that institutes the field of human history as what is necessary and legitimate. If, in the *Letters on Patriotism*, it is cannibalism that is the point of conjuncture of nature and history, in *Federalism, Socialism, and Antitheologism*, it is abstraction that does that work. The field of history opened by abstraction becomes at once 'a work of intellectual and moral development' and 'a work of material emancipation' (Bakunin 1895:110). Freedom is something achieved by means of an activity of conquest and domination across history, in which the wilderness of the earth is transformed into a human world.<sup>7</sup> 'Man produces [the human world] by conquering, step by step, his liberty and human dignity, over and beyond the exterior world and his own bestiality' (Bakunin 1895: 106). Rejecting the Rousseauian vision of freedom as located at the natural origin of history, Bakunin asserts freedom as the telos of history, to which the human inclines once it begins to transform the world according to its own image.

If, in the *Letters on Patriotism*, we have never been fully human because we have always remained too natural, here, amidst a discourse that justifies history, we likewise encounter an ambiguity in the status of the human. 'Man does not really become man, he does not conquer the possibility of his development and his interior perfectibility except under the condition of having broken, to a certain extent at least, the chains of the slave that nature imposes on all its children' (Bakunin 1895: 110). Becoming human entails not the affirmation of nature against the theo-political abstractions of transcendence, but rather breaking with the entire conjoined apparatus of nature and history. Whatever the original discontinuity (produced by abstraction) between history and nature, up to this point in history, there has been only a more profound continuity between the two, a continuity that includes the political-theological apparatus of transcendence that has persisted across and governed history. This continuity must be subverted, if the human is ever to be 'really' human—an assertion of radical discontinuity that has not yet occurred. And, as long as the human functions through or as the conjunction of nature and history, it is imbricated in violence and transcendence, while the goal—of freedom, of being really human, of universal association—remains unattainable. In other words, within Bakunin's problematic two trajectories may be discerned: a legitimating one, which justifies the necessity of history as the process of development of the human towards freedom, and a more

radical one, which makes manifest a profound continuity between nature and history in order to unground the violent operations that span across their putative difference. To stay true to the delegitimizing orientation, one cannot merely affirm nature against alienating transcendence (as Schmitt characterized Bakunin as doing), but one must diagnose the conjunction of nature and history as what must be ungrounded in its entirety, by affirming that we have never been fully human. And though there is an axiomatically-affirmed methodological naturalism that occurs earlier in the work—one that diagnoses a universality solidarity of life and an open-ended perpetual creation (Bakunin 1895: 89–90)—this affirmation stands at a distinct tension with the natural-historical nexus of transcendence that is never that of solidarity, but only of violence and abstraction.

To remain faithful to the delegitimizing trajectory, Bakunin's thinking must not be reduced to a justification of the logic of violence and reproduction that sutures nature and history (as found in *Letters on Patriotism*) or the logic of work and domination (as found in *Federalism, Socialism, and Antitheologism*). To return to the logic and language of the former work, we might say that the exception—whatever names it takes in Bakunin's thinking, from socialism to anarchism—replaces the violence and competition of patriotism with universal association, a universality not of the proper, but of the absolutely common. Elevating justice, it would arrest 'these brutal manifestations of human animality' (Bakunin 1985: 256). But this exception has not—and cannot—emerge from nature and history, which only extend the cycle of violence. Rather, it must emerge from what is radically discontinuous with the natural and historical logic of particularity. There is nowhere to begin, as it were, except from an absolute futurity that would be decoupled from the continuity of particularity and violence and from the mutation of cannibalism across its historical forms. In this way, humanity would not reproduce what is one's own in a patriotic antagonism to what is other. Instead, there emerges the surprising image of an unnatural humanity—the really human and the justly human as decoupled from nature, suspending the historical logic of reproduction to reveal a universality not as the structured totality of particularities, but as the absolutely in-common, dispossessed of the natural and mediated attachments to determinate modes of life in opposition to all that is foreign. In contrast to the natural-historical love of particularity, Bakunin, at his most radical and subversive, could be read, we suggest, as proposing a common, revolutionary task against the amalgam of nature and history, a task that links an absolute futurity with certain tendencies in the present—a revolutionary political nowness serving to break the violent subjugation imposed by the political theology of transcendence. The common cannot be inscribed into the logic of history; it can only be thought, and thus thought itself must begin, by way of a total ungrounding of the world-historical process, so as not to fall into the logic of justification.

#### 4 Immanent resurrection (from the ashes of the common)

In Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903), the founder of so-called Russian Cosmism,<sup>8</sup> the thinking of the common as an ungrounding of world history becomes biopolitical and cosmic in scope. Against the conjunction of nature and history—as inherently violent, as oscillating between extermination and guilt, and as leaving endless death and victims in its wake—Fedorov posits the cosmic void, the still expanse of the universe to be inhabited in-common, in an un-natural existence that would be consubstantial with the universe and in which all death, strife, and hunger would cease. A Russian Orthodox thinker with Gnostic undertones, Fedorov seeks in this way to think a resurrection that would be immanent and not transcendent, one that would abolish death *in* this world, and not in a world beyond—whereby, however, the amalgam of

nature and history that we are used to calling the world would be abolished, in an immanence of ‘the purest (immortal) bliss’ (1995: I/59).<sup>9</sup>

For Fedorov, there is an isomorphism—and a complicity—between nature, this ‘death-bearing force’ (1995: I/40) and history. In nature as in history, in a manner not dissimilar to the logic of cannibalism in Bakunin, the processes of nourishment and reproduction serve division, exploitation, and strife. In this joint natural-historical logic, some toil and die, get exploited and killed, so that others can live. This world not only leaves death in its wake—it is constitutively structured by death. Death is the force that across nature and history perpetuates division and forecloses the common. Fedorov takes issue not only with violent deaths, colonialism, war, or famine—even though nature and history have, for him, functioned through this kind of violence, exacerbated in modernity on an industrial scale. For Fedorov, the issue lies deeper: in the very (reproductive and assimilative) cycle of life and death, and thus in all biological death, no matter how peaceful. Death as such marks the dead as the victims and the exploited of history, insofar as it is our death that makes possible the life of our descendants. Death is thereby justified (and we are sacrificed) for the sake of (future) life—just as the death of our ancestors served the purpose of making our current life possible. The logic of reproductive futurity, cutting across the nature-history divide, is inherently violent—and the fact that we are accustomed to seeing this violence as natural and inevitable constitutes part of the problem. To de-naturalize this violence is to acknowledge it as sacrificial, justificatory, and transcendent, as sacrificing the dead for the sake of the living and building life on top of their ashes. ‘The central contradiction of human nature [is that] the birth of the sons is the death of the fathers’, as Fedorov puts it in his sprawling *The Question of Fraternity* (1995: I/159).

This contradiction serves fundamentally to unground any pretensions of equality or fraternity in the present, insofar as (or as long as) these can only hold among the living. Historical reproduction and biological reproduction work together, and as long as the violence of death continues, history goes on to be the succession of generations sacrificed for the sake of a future they constitutively cannot inherit. This creates the ultimate inequality—between the living and the dead—foreclosing any real enactment of the common. It is this shared natural-historical obliviousness towards the dead that allows Fedorov to use ‘natural’, ‘progressive’, and ‘violent’ in the same breath, opposing them to the common (1995: I/153), or to think together nature and war or sexual drive and industrial development (1995: I/159). Modernity represents for him the highest intensification of war and industry—and even though Fedorov considers contemporary socialism to be too progressivist, the emergence and spread of socialism points for him to the fact that the idea of the common is needed now more urgently than ever before. However, there can be no true equality and fraternity, and no true common, unless they can encompass the dead. One’s mortality is one’s ‘natural poverty’ (1995: I/149): an inequality in the face of history and progress, whose abolition must go hand in hand with, and even serve as the precondition of, the abolition of social inequality or class struggle. ‘Until ... all are united in the common goal, there will always be one part [of society or humanity], one class, turning another part, or another class, into an instrument, with struggle arising as a result ...’ (1995: I/166). This common goal—or ‘common task’, Fedorov’s central name for his entire thinking—can only consist in a community, and communion, of the living with the (resurrected) dead.

At this point, the thinking of the common as something that has so far had no real place in history except as an idea or a striving—a key point to which we will return below—turns in Fedorov into the thinking of what he terms real or immanent resurrection. Despite the centrality of death for his thought, Fedorov’s is not a philosophy of finitude—or a philosophy of life in any standard sense. It is a philosophy of radical immanence, free of all transcendence, including that of death. ‘From transcendent resurrection to immanent resurrection’

(1995: I/226): such is the move that must be made—from the Christian idea of an otherworldly resurrection to the enactment of a materially common existence stripped of the power of death. The very logic of succession, as constitutive of the violence of the world, must be abolished. Seeing as, within the natural-historical logic, ‘the older generation’ is inevitably ‘supplanted by the younger’ (1995: I/45), to think the common is to think the cessation of reproduction, and thus of the succession of generations itself (1997: III/346). ‘What used to be succession (history), must become *simultaneity*’ (1997: III/365). In place of the temporality of finitude as the time of (sacrificial) death, the atemporality of immanent resurrection must be affirmed in and as the common task.

The common task entails not so much an emptying out of history as its oversaturation: a fullness of life that precludes any further production or reproduction. This means, however, that the resurrected life cannot be life as we know it, or part of the life–death binary. It is a state of utter immanence, without the transcendence and violence introduced by death—and thus without any ‘natural’ givenness, insofar as nature is itself beholden to this binary. It is, so to speak, an utterly unnatural life. As such, it cannot constitute a mere repetition or continuation of what used to be. If resurrected life is the real life, and if our natural-historical life has only served death, that means we have never been alive. ‘We require’, writes Fedorov, ‘not merely a restoration of what is gone, we require resurrection’ (1995: I/281). The common task must be thought as proceeding not from a purported origin from which history might be seen as having departed or fallen away—but from something that has never taken place, in nature or in history.

The non-place of the common task is also what defines for Fedorov the true beginning of thought. Thought must for him proceed not from the question of why there is something rather than nothing (‘why does the existing exist?’)—a question of sufficient reason and world-justification—but the question of death (‘why does the living die?’ [1997: III/301]). To the theodical question, ‘Why does the world lie in evil?’ (1997: III/367), Fedorov answers not by seeking to justify this evil or to explain it away as something inessential. On the contrary, death, violence, and the spectres of the dead whose ashes sustain us are precisely what is the most essential and what we all have in common—we, who are always already sacrificed to history through the mere fact of our birth. In fact, ‘Why does the world lie in evil?’ constitutes for Fedorov an apocalyptic and Gnostic line of questioning, informed by a catastrophic sentiment of a planet that is being depleted and a world that is already ending—a sentiment at once registering the crisis of modern progressivist futurity and putting it in a more-than-global, (literally) universal or cosmic perspective:

Our sun, too, is dimming, even if slowly, and we are right to say not only that there will come a time when it will cease to give off light entirely, but that it is already coming ‘and now is’ [John 5:25]. The death of the stars (sudden or slow) provides an instructive example for us, an ominous warning; the exhaustion of the earth, the eradication of the forests, the perversion of the meteoritic process manifesting itself in floods and droughts—all of that attests that there will be ‘famines and pestilences’ [Matthew 24:7] ... But also, other than its slowly, gradually coming end, we cannot be certain that the earth, this grain of sand in the universe, does not succumb to a sudden catastrophe... Does one not hear in this the ominous ‘know neither the day nor the hour’ [Matthew 25:13], and should this not spur us to an even greater vigil and labour, so as to exit this agonizing uncertainty? Thus, the world is approaching its end, and the human, by its activity, is expediting the end—for a civilization that exploits but does not restore cannot have any result other than the acceleration of the end.

(1995: I/196–97)

To accelerate the end, without the thinking of immanent resurrection, is to absolutize death and transcendence. Instead, on a planetary and cosmic scale, the ashes (of our planet and all dying worlds) are the assumption from which thought must proceed—the only assumption that, as it were, undoes the world and absolutely ungrounds it, joining us immediately with and in the common task. The point of asking ‘Why does the world lie in evil?’ is not to justify evil, but to undo or counteract it with a oneness of thought and action that would proceed immanently from death, suffering, and the end of the world as what we all have in common.

In his idea of the common task as simultaneously the beginning of thought, Fedorov calls for a transformation of both thinking and action (‘labour’) via the non-place of the common. The common task entails, for him, consciousness of the dead—of ‘the life they have given over to us and the ashes left by them and returned to the earth’ (1995: I/177). True consciousness must, as it were, remain immanently in death without, however, making death into a telos. To recognize the common task as rooted in the commonality of suffering and death (I/185) is also to demand the real, and really universal, equality, on which death can no longer impose itself. For Fedorov, thought as such is transformed by proceeding from the non-place of death, extermination, and ashes as what we have in common: ‘As long as strife continues to exist, if we take thought to be inseparable from action [...] then “to be cognizant of” cannot but mean “to supplant”, “to exterminate”’ (1995: I/149). Modern consciousness, including the consciousness of modern philosophy, is fundamentally dividing and exterminating. There is truth in this consciousness, too, insofar as it reflects the (divided, violent) condition of the world—the condition of colonial expansion and extermination as well as class division and industrial exploitation (1995: I/183).<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the undoing of this condition and the enactment of a consciousness that would be a consciousness of the common and not of division and extermination go necessarily hand in hand. That is why it is so important not to cover death over with (an illusion of) life, not to obfuscate death or impose a transcendence on the immanence of the ashes and the void by turning death into a transcendent, ineliminable, sovereign authority. The common task entails an immanence of death, too, not just of resurrection (1995: I/195). In the radical immanence of the common task, death (as what the common task proceeds from) and resurrection (as what it is directed at) may be said to coincide.

Resurrection is for Fedorov literal and material. It is, in his words, a project: ‘Immortality cannot in truth be considered solely *subjective* or *objective*; it is *projective*’ (1995: I/195). For Fedorov, the more technical term ‘project’ emphasizes that thought and action, critique and labor, subjectivity and objectivity, coincide in the common task. ‘[F]aith and critique can find their reconciliation only as project, because although, for project, immortality is not a fact, as it is for faith, it is also not a [mere] thought, as it is for critique; as project, immortality is the hypothesis enacted in resurrection’ (1995: I/195). The project or task of resurrection begins with what history treats as nothing, with the void that history leaves behind, so as to locate in this nothingness a real force capable of overturning history. This void is furthermore identified by Fedorov—and this is why his thinking is cosmist—with the cosmic void, the expanse of the universe; the ashes of history with cosmic dust. As history destroys its victims, as the living dies, it becomes one with the immanence of the universe—the ashes of the dead become one with cosmic dust and cosmic rays. It is at this zero-level of the Real, at which the earth, its nature and its history are constituted, but which at once precedes and exceeds all natural-historical life—at this particle-level, as it were—that life must be re-constituted, re-built from the ground up. Fedorov’s projective thinking treats the world as mere material (‘merely an ensemble of means’, [1995: I/195]), to be immanently reconfigured in the common task. Nature, too, must be undone as a death-bearing force, and merge with the common resurrected life—so that, against the modern idea of an external mastery of nature,

Fedorov puts forward the project of an immanent inhabitation and steering of the universe once all (re-)production has ceased (see e.g., 1995: I/39–42).<sup>11</sup>

Russia is supposed to have a special non-place in this project—a point that connects Fedorov to Chaadaev. Even Fedorov's polemical insistence that Russia should not be considered an exception to the logic of the peoples or the world-historical family (1995: I/200), directed as it is clearly (if implicitly) against Chaadaev, conceals a more fundamental affinity in their thinking of nothingness and history. Not unlike Chaadaev, Fedorov identifies the Russian *terra nullius* as that which *remains still* vis-à-vis history, so as to affirm this stillness—not merely as backwardness, but as an atemporal principle that escapes, and can serve to unground, the logic of history. If history, human and natural, is what propels itself forward through strife and death—what erects its progress on the ashes of human generations and the ashes of the planet—then Russia's 'thousand-year stagnation' coincides for Fedorov symbolically with these ashes, or with the void of suffering and death on which history is imposed and which it leaves in its wake. These ashes form the black soil on which the Russian peasant labours, a blackness associated by Fedorov with Russia itself: 'What is civilization', he asks, 'i.e., Western Europe [...], other than the exploitation of nature by the hands of the exploited labourer peoples (*чернорабочие народы*; literally: black-labourer peoples) such as Russia?' (1995: I/197). Russia must embrace what Fedorov sees as an existence of nonviolence, suffering, and 'black labour'. In its 'ascetic vigil', its 'unsurveyable expanse', and its 'solitary wilderness' (1995: I/200), Russian existence is more atemporal and ahistorical than progressive. Russia's vigilant stillness and endless expanse coincide with the stillness and expanse of a universe seen not as a threat, but as the non-place of an immanent inhabitation in common, without violence and death.

But even though Fedorov desires Russia to take up the project of the common task as its own, and sees in the Russian (absence of) historical development all prerequisites for such a role, the future still remains for him crucially undecided and uncertain—hence his obsessive interest, throughout his writings, in contemporary geopolitical developments around the globe. World history is for him the site of struggle and division, with the common representing but one tendency within this struggle, one that has so far mostly been faint and unconscious, but one that *must* win if the transcendence of death is to be overcome. One can see the tension between Fedorov's desire for the triumph of the common task of resurrection and his anxiety over its actual historical prospects reflected in his fundamental ambivalence towards history. Fedorov tends to alternate between an investment in a providential philosophy of history, on the one hand, in which he sees humanity advancing, even if in fits and starts, towards the idea of the common, and a Gnostic refusal of any faith in the world and its history, on the other. Sometimes, he is at pains to construct a providential narrative and a philosophy of history of his own (see e.g., 1995: I/155–169)—and yet, ultimately, he distrusts history too much to rely on providence. Things might have been otherwise and still might be. History is mostly full of errors and movements of division and strife that are just as meaningless as they are devastating, testifying to the blind natural force at work in it (e.g., 1995: I/180–81).

Thus, the movement of European colonialism was for Fedorov the highest 'perversion' of the common and the collective (1995: I/150; cf. 1995: I/183). There was no higher necessity to this movement, and no progress in it towards the common task. In fact, 'those trying to assure that humanity is on its own headed towards progress are the true blight on humanity. Even if humanity has been heading towards universal resurrection up to this point unconsciously, it cannot reach it in this way' (1995: I/197). Ultimately, Fedorov rejects the providential (or Hegelian) idea of world-history as theodicy. If there is a providence, it has only worked *in* history yet *against* it—against the death-bearing and death-dealing amalgam of nature and history. The fact that history is ruled by the same blind force as nature renders

fundamentally uncertain any appeal to divine providence. The future cannot be left to providence; it is for Fedorov still completely uncertain how history will go if left to its own devices—in fact, sometimes it sounds like providence on its own is bound to fail (e.g., I/ 165, 169) unless it becomes the common task. The project of the common task is, however, what has been as such absent in history. Therefore, the future can only be thought providentially on the condition of the real enactment of the common task, and not the other way around. What ultimately prevails in Fedorov's thinking is the sense of the world as accelerating towards a catastrophe—the sense of the historical precarity of the common, which must be rescued from and affirmed against the nature/history conjunction.

## 5 Conclusion

The speculative trajectory of Russian thought we have sketched in this essay shares a set of distinctive elements. At its most radical, it affirms a sense of the irreducible, impossible yet real non-place of thinking—an affirmation of a world-historical void that engulfs thought and from which thought must proceed if there is to be a future-in-common free of the violent divisions and transcendences imposed by the world. Yet as each of the three figures illustrate, one also detects a theoretical ambivalence at the heart of this trajectory—a hesitation that arises from reliance on the more traditional logics of justification of the (Christian-modern) world and its history. While inheriting idealist and providential philosophies of history, nineteenth-century Russian thought at its most speculative opens up a void that serves to de-absolutize and unground them, ungrounding thereby as well the fundamental logics of the modern world. We have attempted here to reconstruct this tension, while emphasizing the unique ways that, turning against history in its imbrication with nature and providence, Chaadaev, Bakunin, and Fedorov gave voice to a thought of delegitimation as a way of articulating a justice against the world as it is.

## Notes

- 1 Kirill Chepurin's work on this article was supported by the Russian Science Foundation under grant no. 19-18-00100.
- 2 The following section draws directly from our previously published work on Chaadaev: Chepurin and Dubilet (2019a) and Chepurin and Dubilet (2019b).
- 3 All translations into English are our own; we have, however, consulted two extant translations (Chaadaev 1966; Chaadaev 1991b).
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, translations are our own.
- 5 Another nineteenth-century articulation of such a machine is found in the work of the early Marx. For a convergent articulation of this, see Dubilet (2021).
- 6 We want to thank Andrea Gadberry for first bringing to our attention the role of cannibalism in Bakunin's writings.
- 7 It is this dimension that accounts for the lack of any kind of decolonial reflections in Bakunin—a fact especially visible in his consideration of the United States as a political entity.
- 8 More generally on Russian cosmism, see Groys (2018).
- 9 All translations are our own. That Fedorov thinks bliss (*блаженство*) as annihilative of world-history, is more than a mere index of his Christianity—it is, rather, indicative of a broader entanglement between bliss and the Christian-modern. For a convergent reading of bliss in the German Idealist philosopher F. W. J. Schelling, see Chepurin (2019).
- 10 This also means that modernity is for Fedorov—*contra* the common identification of modernity with immanence—an epoch of transcendence, not immanence. On modernity as transcendence, see relatedly Chepurin and Dubilet (2021) and Albernaz and Chepurin (2020).
- 11 At the same time, the very use of the terms 'labour' and 'project' indexes the constitutive entanglement of Fedorov's thinking with modernity, even as he seeks to unground it. We hope to pursue this line of questioning more fully in our future work on Fedorov.

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