

Power to the People? Radical Philosophy Conference May 9th '09

In discussing the history of the dialectic in *Minima Moralia: Reflections On A Damaged Life* (1951), Theodor Adorno asserts that the 'thema probandum' is not inherent to the dialectical procedure but rests in the fact that thinkers use the dialectical method instead of giving themselves up to it. In this sense then, they arrest the dialectic and disregard its value for life, deadening it in its tracks by pointing to the insuperable inertia of facts¹. Adorno's analysis, coupled with his, and Max Horkheimer's contemporaneous thesis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, suggests - albeit abstractly - an untimely panacea: a modality, or method of 'dialectical voluntarism', that is now the subject of an on-going project by political philosopher Peter Hallward².

Hallward claims that giving oneself up to the dialectic is a matter of 'will', and whilst he recognizes that there is no notion more roundly condemned canonically, he insists upon its simplicity. It is nothing more, it would seem, than the ability to confront the seeming 'insuperable inertia of facts' and to be mobilized in the belief, and the old cliché, that 'where there is a will there is a way'; or, as he notes, it is to adapt Antonio Machada's phrase, later championed by Paulo Freire 'they assume that "there is no way; we make the way by walking it"'.³

Accordingly, to say "we make the way by walking it" is to resist the power of the historical, cultural or socio-economic terrain to determine the way. To say "we make the way by walking it" is to volunteer oneself to the dialectical motion of modernity. It is not to resist this motion, it is not to race or run against it, it is not to use it to one's own end by stopping it in its tracks, it is rather, to place one foot in front of the other,

¹ Adorno, Theodor (2005) *Minima Moralia: Reflections On A Damaged Life*, London and New York: Verso.

² Adorno, Theodor and Horkheimer Max (1997) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London and New York: Verso.

³ Hallward, Peter (2009) 'The Will of the People: Notes towards a dialectical voluntarism', *Radical Philosophy Journal*, vol. 155 p.17 - 29.

and to proceed one step at a time, remembering all the while that we *can* control our path into the future, but we cannot decide the conditions, anymore than we can determine the terrain.⁴

To say “we make the way by walking it” is, accordingly, to affirm the relational primacy of the subjective to the objective forms. It is to predicate the person over the path. It is to point to the rock - the ‘insuperable inertia of facts’ - and to remember that such ‘insuperability’ only appears, as such, in the light of a project to climb past. To say ‘we make the way by walking it’ is to give the power back to the people, because it is collective volition that will raise up the rock, it is ‘will’ that *will* find a way past.

‘Power to the People?’, a Radical Philosophy Conference organized by Peter Hallward and the Radical Philosophy collective, took place in the Birbeck Institute, London, last weekend; and it was, on the whole, quite an optimistic conference despite the quizzical over-tone. In exploring moments of collective volition, periods in history when ‘disciplined’ people took the power into their own hands, the conference asked not only who were these people, but who are the ‘people’ now? And in expounding ideas of class, commons and multitudes, it asked whether such moments have come to an irretrievable end?

In his opening address Peter Hallward captured the historical current of the coming day through a brief process of periodization that pointed not only to a displacement in the meaning of ‘power’, but in that of ‘people’, a displacement that has taken place over the last two hundred years. Under the rubric of *The General Will*, the historian David Andress was the first to deliver a paper. This paper, entitled ‘The General Will on the Street: Parisian Activism, Sovereignty and Power, 1789-93’, expounded the

⁴ To say ‘we make the way by walking it’ is to remember Marx’s admonition: ‘Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen, but under given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted...’ in Lefebvre, Henri (1995) *Introduction To Modernity*, London and New York: Verso.

evolution of Parisian radicalism, and the development of a culture of surveillance, through a discrete political sequence and a dialectic of defensive and punitive sovereignty. French historian Sophie Wahnich was second up, responding to the historical notion of 'people' in Andress' paper as a rhetoric of the dismissive, what she felt, pejoratively captured the revolution in the dyadic terrain of anarchy and ambivalence.

Wahnich's paper 'How Do People Make Themselves Heard?' was an analysis of the 'institution' and 'violence'; an analysis that chose to emphasize the emotional dynamics of the revolution itself. In exploring this political sequence in terms of discontinuity, Wahnich's paper pointed to three particularly complex political and emotional situations, when the people of Paris, tried to make themselves heard but failed: the petitioners' demonstration of July 17, 1791, which ended in the Champs de Mar massacre; the petitioners' demonstration of June 20, 1792 which proceeded without violence but failed to resolve the political crisis; and the 10th of August 1792 which marked the revolutionary decision to no longer restrain insurrectional violence. Wahnich's paper concluded that in the critical moment of 1792 it was a matter of taking seriously 'the will of the people', what she describes as 'a will that has the capacity to invent refined forms of appeasement in order to make the demand for public vengeance heard; without letting it destroy the social and political community grounded on a love of life..and on the love of the Rights of Man, and of the citizen as a commitment to free life in the revolutionary polis.' In exploring revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence in terms of failure and vengeance Wahnich's paper subsisted in suggesting that executive or repressive violence cannot be confused, or conflated with the violence of a sovereign acting power - for they have neither the same methods nor the same objectives - '(T)he former, in the form of martial law, is conservative and police-related; the latter intends to create rights, it thinks of itself as constituent, as sovereign power or divine violence..'

Violence formed the foundation of the afternoon session too, in which ‘Class, Commons and Multitudes’ kicked off with an interesting paper by The Commoner Blog(ger) Daniel Bensaid. Bensaid’s paper asked whether ‘..we can (still) break the vicious circle of domination?’ Like Hallward, and Wahnich before him, Bensaid, currently of the University of Paris, periodized, and pointed to displacements - particularly the substitution of the ‘possibility’ of revolution in the Foucauldian realization circa 1977/’78 that revolution is no longer a question of ‘possibility’, but is instead a question of ‘desire’.

In ruminating this displacement - the transformation of ‘revolution’ into a Symbolic expression of rupture, as opposed to any actual, or ‘Real’ strategy for change - Bensaid concluded that in the necessity, and urgency to change the world now, it must no longer be a question of thinking ‘revolution’ in terms of ‘ruptures’, ‘breaks’ or ‘miracles’ that come from ‘outside’ - what he designates as Badiou-like⁵ ‘events’ - rather, such necessity *now*, demands that we change the very terms of the debate. Insisting, therefore, that it is now a matter of creating ‘openings’, or ‘gaps’, it is, accordingly - after Henri Lefebvre’s analogy of Utopia as ‘an unpractical feeling of possibility’ - a matter of breaking the vicious circle of domination by making revolution practical, and ‘possible’ yet again.

The problem with Bensaid’s paper, in this instance, as is often the problem with those who level attacks against Alain Badiou, is an unfamiliarity with his philosophy. Afterall, what is Badiou’s meta-ontology if not the management of this ‘unpractical feeling of possibility’? Historically, the ‘event’ is, for Badiou, to be found in the political condition, and located in the French Revolution, the trace of which transformed the world through the (T)ruth of a revolutionary politics.

In all its conditions, be they political, scientific, amorous or artistic, Badiou’s ‘event’ subsists in the retroactive recognition of collective volition: volition that is neither

⁵ Alain Badiou, contemporary French philosopher.

roused by, nor reducible to revolution qua 'libido'. It is that which, through fidelity to the event of (T)ruth, transforms such "unpractical feelings of possibility" into a subjective truth procedure, a procedure that creates 'openings' or 'gaps' in its transformation of a being or subject that is, into a being- or subject-for . What is the Badiouian 'event' itself, then, if not the possibility of possibilities?

The subject-for the French Revolution, for example, acknowledges the creation of a truth that we are still working through, a truth that is generic and infinite, a truth that, as such, creates new and ever nuanced understandings of the political condition; a truth that tears through knowledge, or comes to pierce a hole in it; a truth that creates 'gaps' and 'openings' in our very approach to politics. A truth that undermines 'democracy', a truth that reveals this masquerade to be no more than mere 'opinion', no more than "the vicious circle of domination" itself: that which resists the universal, either as value or pre-condition, that which fails, or refuses to raise the problems of society, and the individual beyond the level of the 'particular' .

Interestingly it was the 'particular' itself that formed the foundation of the next paper, 'Crisis, Tragedies and the Commons' which was delivered by the University of East London's political economist Massimo De Angelis. In demanding that we call a halt to the 'end of history' rhetoric and assume a perspective that espouses 'the beginning', De Angelis' paper situated the current market crisis in terms of a historical homology unique to the changing nature of the dialectic in Marx. In expounding the current crisis as homologous to the 1930's depression and the energy crisis of the late 70's, De Angelis stated that we are at a defining moment in history, a moment in which we find that our relationship to the 'common' has opened up.

De Angelis' paper suggested that throughout history the memory of 'commoning' has consistently given strength against enclosure, but today, the very fact that no prevalent memory of 'commoning' survives, points to the very lack, or invisibility of the common in our lives. But according to De Angelis, the first effect of market crisis is

that people are forced to find alternative ways to survive, people start a 'commoning' that goes beyond the commodification form. Historically, this suggests that there will be an increased level of 'commoning' in daily solidarity, but without wishing to wait for Godot so to speak, if there is already 'commoning' amongst indigenous peoples, as according to De Angelis, how does one recognize the 'indigenous' nominally, and in order to build on this in our lives?

One need look no further than the artworld now, and to the liberal communism of the 'relational aesthete', to know that contemporary cultural models valorize identities that are flexible, interstitial and international; histories that are negotiable, nominal and nomadic; and networks that are dispersed, multitudinous and democratic; and that in such variance - or dogged discrepancies (truth be told) - another word apropos of ('Real') communism has been added to the dirty-word list: 'indigenous'. The term 'indigenous' whilst lending itself to 'nationalism', in fact, implies much more than just this thing - how to consider the term nominally is the task one should set oneself. In defining capitalism and the free market as a process that creates 'subjects', and then 'subjectivation' itself as that which erases the memory of the 'common' by erasing the memory of the 'indigenous', De Angelis insists that now more than ever we need to think the 'indigenous'. In championing Evo Morales' recent and radical move to nationalize Bolivia's oil and gas, he maintains that the 'beginning of history' in which we find ourselves *now* must be determined through this type of indigenous politics, pedagogy and praxis or else it is to be the end of it.

Another interesting paper on the day, and in relation thinking this 'beginning' through 'particularities' was delivered by Guyatari Spivak, and unfortunately it was one that also brought this conference to its end. Spivak's 'They the People' championed Antonio Gramsci, and his *Prison Notebooks*; in which the latter's conception of the Party as the Modern Prince pertains to Derrida's description of Pharmakon: hegemony, the Party and indeed the State have the ambivalence of

something that can be both poison and medicine; what Spivak would come to describe as ‘a blueprint for practical and epistemological action.’

For Spivak, the difference between establishing another Europe and other world, now, which is a possible and important one, would be built from local and regional party politics, from critical regionalism within the state: ‘let us not forget’ she asserts, “‘citizenship’ has not been denationalized, parties are still important in local and national politics.’ The Party, which constitutes ‘actual’ volition, or politics on the ground, and arguably, yes, the hum-drum and often difficult task of mobilising the ‘we’ of the people, and in ‘Real’ time, has, according to Spivak, an archaic importance. But this importance, and increasingly the Party itself, is being ‘displaced’. The mood on the Left is in favor of extra-state collective action, of ‘anti-systemic movements’, typically captured in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s notion of ‘multitudes’, but as Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatani would come to note also, what is called ‘terrorism’ is extra-state collective action too.

The academic conception of ‘multitudes’, does not, according to Spivak, (one of the leading experts on alter-globalization - a movement that depends both on the hegemony implicit in globalization (on the antagonism implicit to its claim to universalism,) and on the contingent power of ‘particularity’) match up to the practical fact or task of activism on the ground. In a closing, and rather comic comment, that could be directly critical of the empiricization of the virtual valorized by communicative capitalism, the typing Left, and contemporary cultural models apropos of ‘liberal communists’ as *seemingly* unrelated as Bill Gates and Nicholas Bourriaud, Spivak notes: ‘accessing Beijing on your computer does not change the way you think, you can’t diagnose epistemic differences on the basis of changes in machines. When I mention the empirical..’ She muses, ‘I am not falling into it.’

At the end of this day it seemed clear that what ‘we’ the people need now, is to hang on to the contingent power of our particularities, we need actual as well as virtual

volition, we need a 'commoning' that goes beyond both the 'commodification' and the 'networked telecommunication' form; and arguably, most of important of all, if we the people are to make the way by walking it *now*, we need to begin with the antagonistic gesture of acknowledging who 'we' are. As Spivak notes: '(W)e cannot wash our hands of the empirical facts, we have learned the terms race, class and gender, but none of these are terms that we are using'.