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“The Democratic Authenticity of Spontaneous Public Protest”

“The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion.”¹ So what to do?

Introduction

In his 1965 essay, “Repressive Tolerance”, Herbert Marcuse argues that tolerance of repressive speech is ‘inauthentic’ tolerance.² It is inauthentic because it establishes a paradox internal to notions of toleration, as an act commonly believed to be one that ensures freedom. Moreover, although it may be authentic to the constituted world-as-such, it is ontologically inauthentic, a decision in Bad Faith Jean-Paul Sartre would say, precisely because it is an *uncritical defense* of the present situation, the Symbolic Order/chain of signifiers, the established state, stratified democracy, or, our world (‘world’ defined as an ontologically-closed set).

I argue below that to understand, justify and topologize localized, singular socio-political acts, such as of tolerance or, more specifically, Protest, we must explore the complicated positions of authenticity and inauthenticity as categorizing, ontological concepts, as they relate to our world, our present.

And so the aim of this theoretical work is to address a very practical question: is spontaneous public Protest an authentic or inauthentic act in our democratic world? I maintain that spontaneous public Protesting is an authentic act of democratic demonstration because such action runs counter to the established parameters of political expression, that is, it elicits alterity, the embracing of what Martin Heidegger refers to as the ‘potentiality-for-Being’ (*Seinkönnen*), or

¹ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936, repr. trans. on Marxists.org, via UCLA School of Theatre, Film and Television): ch. 12.

² See Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance” (1965).

similarly, Sartre's 'Being-for-itself' (*être-pour-soi*). Whereas, on the other hand, uncritical performance of established state ritual, including regularized voting, is ontologically inauthentic (which is not to say inessential) since it is tantamount to non-analytical, uncritical defense of the structure of the *status quo*, no matter what it is, and is thus a closing off of potentialities-for-Being by encouraging general stasis.

To act authentically in our present, democratic *world* is then is to allow new political truths, discourses to be forged external to institutionalized, state democracy and its internal languages, in those fleeting and finite moments of what Simon Critchley calls true-democracy, those ontologically authentic actions considered by the mainstream to be radical, or, in British terminology, 'anti-social'. I agree with Critchley when he argues that "democracy is not a fixed political form of society, but rather...the *de-formation* of society from itself through the act of material political manifestation,"³ that is, the radical disturbance of spontaneous public Protest, or true democracy, which "calls the state [as-such] into question and calls the established order to account, not in order to do away with the state, desirable though that might well be in some utopian sense, but in order to better it or attenuate its malicious effect."⁴

So how do we defend radical politics evident in Protest, or even alternative political options, in a society, within a media, in which such spontaneity of mass public display lay outside of supposed authentic democratic action? The first step, and what I try to do here, is to re-conceptualize authentic and inauthentic in relation to healthy democratic life, as part of a larger project to re-work contemporary theories of democracy. I believe that a critical assessment of the notion of epistemological gaps highlighted by Herbert Marcuse & Walter Benjamin guided more specifically by the ontological spacing between authenticity and inauthenticity made evident in the materialist dialectics properly of Alain Badiou, in moderate dialogue with Martin Heidegger, Jacques

³ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (New York: Verso, 2008): 129.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

Lacan and Jacques Rancière, can help us better understand and embrace the pivotal role of protest in sustaining a vibrant plural, democratic world.

Circumstances

One month ago in the Journal *Science*, a report from Canadian researchers was published showing that within a controlled, social-scientific research project, critical thinking decreased religious belief. The argument is simple: religious belief is largely intuitive; critical thinking short-circuits intuitive thinking; thus analytical, or critical, thinking blocks intuition. How though, did the researchers supposedly arrest intuitive thinking and foster non-emotional thought? They did so by showing “images of artwork that encouraged analytical thinking”,⁵ mechanically reproduced images, if you will. One object presented was a copy of Rodin’s, *The Thinker*, itself an artwork with over 20 ‘originals’. Here we clearly see the infinite, the questioning of life, of ourselves and our world, passing through the finitude of materiality, not just man, but man as bronze, strong and powerful, but confused and aware of its own finitude.

What is further interesting about this religion-as-intuition-research is a response by Robert McCauley, author of *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*,⁶ who before this study believed that it was essentially impossible to change a person’s religious belief. His argument for why this is so is quite logical. McCauley said, “it’s not likely you would argue someone out of a religious belief very often because they don’t hold those beliefs on argumentative or reflective grounds in the first place.”⁷ Trying then to alter one’s intuition is a losing battle when you are confronting that intuition through logical or analytical thinking. There is no space for debate. What is needed to alter intuition is a discourse that makes one think critically in general. Instead of arguing from within, through

⁵ Quoted from the report on the article by B. Perlow, “Study: Analytic thinking can decrease religious belief,” 28 April 2012: http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/27/study-analytic-thinking-can-decrease-religious-belief/?hpt=hp_t3

⁶ Robert N. McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (Oxford, 2011).

⁷ Quoted from the Perlow report, see n. 5.

institutionalized democratic channels, a wholly different medium of thinking is required and such alternative 'language' needs to be fostered external to the present. How is this done? Can spontaneous public protest be the personification of *The Thinker*, what fosters critical thinking of political belief (which, I'd argue, is perhaps equally as intuitive as religious belief)?

On June 29th, 1938 Walter Benjamin recorded a conversation he had had with Bertolt Brecht in which Benjamin agreed with Brecht that it is the faults in performance that produce alienating effects, (as Brecht confirms, "in art there is the fact of failure..."⁸), and that provide the work of art, here the play, or, public performance, with "epic characteristics".⁹ What we see here is Benjamin explaining the radical potential of artwork as a negative (potentially negating) performance, that is, it is what's 'wrong', or outside of the expectations we have of the established actions that gives the piece a feeling of infinity, with the site of the error as the meeting place of the infinite and finite.

This awareness of the 'mistake', the unexpected expression from within the discourse of that world, that of art, that of politics, leads one to recognize the finitude of infinity, the singularity of the infinite that is reality, which the consumer of art then can actualize into abstracted form, that is, question the consistency of the logic of a world, and act out an alternative situation. For Benjamin and Brecht, the road to radicality, to alternative language, is the unexpected act, or moment, which can foster critical awareness of the existing Symbolic order, reality. Only once this space is opened can an actually novel discourse, new political truth, real change, be developed, and eventually turned into an alternative (political) reality.

What is meant by real change here is not the re-institutionalizing rhetoric of, say, American presidential candidates, but that "which imposes an effective

⁸ W. Benjamin, memoir, see R. Taylor (ed.) & F. Jameson (afterword), *Aesthetics and Politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno* (London, New York: Verso, 1980 [1977]): 74.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

discontinuity on the world where it takes place.”¹⁰ The source of this real change, again, depends on a powerful exception, “an exception both to the axioms of the multiple [the differentiated Reality] and to the transcendental constitution of objects and relations.”¹¹

In addition to what Benjamin says in his letter to Brecht, we can find through reference to psychoanalysis, another Benjaminian example of an ontologically authentic act. He says that Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (*Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagsleben*) “isolated and made analyzable things heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception.”¹² This is precisely what I am saying is the power of the spontaneity of the Protest, for it to actualize the Real, those latent ideas floating along in the stream of consciousness. It is at this critical junction (the vortex?) when a space is opened to the Real, to the infinite, to alterity. From here lay open the possibility (not the necessity, Benjamin & Brecht both believe in pure chance) of the confrontation of Real and reality, of the infinite and finite, of the two, bodies and languages, renegotiated by the third, what Badiou calls truths, or more generally in his philosophical tradition, materially determined ideas (hence materialist dialectics).

When occurring repeatedly this can lead to the development of a new chain of signifiers which can be strung together through subjectivity, that is, by Subjects defined as such by their relation to the Acts and Events (Protests) that have been retro-actively determined to engender this post-Evental (post-pure democracy/Protest) Symbolic order. But these events do not in themselves precipitate the change; that is the, *chance*, development of the Subject that retro-actively marks itself in relation to a set of Acts and Events as either faithful to the new ideas, to critical engagement with the present, or denies that these were in fact Events, or is obscure. This is how Protests can foster critical thinking,

¹⁰ A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (NY: Continuum, 2009): 357.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹² Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936, repr. trans. on Marxists.org, via UCLA School of Theatre, Film and Television): ch. 13.

engender a new political Truth, because there is forever a space between their language and that of the state's.

It is thus the space between Protest and established democratic channels that provides it the power to reach beyond the Truths of the present, to say something outside the voice of the established consensus. Democracy as an institution cannot do this. Democracy as institution is meant to provide stability and conformity to norms as accepted by the majority. Why we believe in it is because these norms can change, and hence so can reality, but, and this is the frightful thing, they don't *have* to change, they *can* remain the same structurally, *ad infinitum*; an outside stimulus, like Protest, must erupt.

Again, worlds are self-contained logics, local and meta-cultures, constituted by the same construction. The evolution of a world, in the spirit of materialist dialectics, is such that nothingness is the end, whereas destruction, precipitated by an act external to the Truth of the world, like spontaneous Protest, is the beginning. That is, a world is precipitated by negation, the negating of an existing world. Nothingness, spontaneous Protest, true democracy, is the mediating situation between worlds; it does not mean there is no language at these nodal points, no symbols or ideas, but that they are non-institutionalized, they have not become, actualized by the Subjectivization of Events. Protest randomly makes holes in the sense or logic of the worlds, it "causes an interruption in the circulation of sense....[it] is a sense-less or mad act, and by the same token rational."¹³

In a way then the spontaneous public Protest is a manifestation of the chance presence of *Dasein* (hence Heidegger's reluctance to democracy), the Being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*) of Sartre, the state of Being which negates the Being-in-Itself (*être-en-soi*). *Dasein* is the mode of 'existence' whereby possibility for alterity is maintained even in the face of being-there, in the world as constituted. For Heidegger, ontological essence, for life to have meaning/essence and to exist, it requires not so much a state of presence (though this necessarily occurs at

¹³ A. Badiou, *Conditions* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992): 24.

moments) but of potential, of Authenticity constantly re-negotiated against Inauthenticity, the dialectics of Being, of Democracy as Critchley expresses it above. On the one hand then, ontological essence is a Being-what-one-is, Being present-at-hand, or, in other words, a functioning within the Symbolic order, within the state democratic system as it is constituted, but to be *Dasein*, wholly existent, there must remain within this a constant and indeterminate, unrecognizable and multiple possibility for truly alternative realities, existences, a 'potentiality-for-being'.¹⁴ *Dasein* is authentic when it is its own possibility, when it can choose itself, step outside the Symbolic order and/or challenge it externally to its structure, recognize a 'potentiality-for-being-a-whole';¹⁵ it is inauthentic when in-the-world, present-at-hand, lost in the idle talk of the present reality.¹⁶

Thus we have four examples of how the chance questioning of the *status quo* occurs. In terms of the evidence developed in this paper these four can be categorized loosely as theoretical and empirical, with two each: the empirical conclusions have come from Rodin's, *The Thinker* & Benjamin's and Brecht's respective responses to the external voice in the world of the artistic performance. The theoretical evidence has been Freud's (and by extension Lacan's) psychoanalysis, and of course spontaneous public Protest (the power here is latent; it becomes empirical). All of these have been equated with the fostering of critical thinking by what is inauthentic to the reality as such, but is *ontologically Authentic*.

Conditions

Now that the basic ideas are outlined, and examples provided, let it be asked directly, what is spontaneous public Protest in terms of ontological Authenticity? That is, what is the ontology behind this Protest as Authenticity claim? What is

¹⁴ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, H42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

the relation between a world, a Symbolic order and Authenticity/Inauthenticity?
 What is meant by the “operational category”¹⁷ called Truth, or the Real?

As alluded to in the opening above, a *world* is a self-contained unit, a singularity that is constituted by multiple acts/events/language. But what does this mean, how does it work? Steeped in French tradition, the claim here is that a world, e.g. our democratic culture, can be explored *via* three key theoretical processes: 1. Jacques Derrida’s notion of *Différance*; 2. Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s concept of Territorialization; and 3. Alain Badiou’s theory of Cultural Subtraction. What then are *Différance*, Territorialization, and Cultural Subtraction, and how do they help us in ‘authenticating’ spontaneous public Protest, in eliciting its democratic authenticity?

The wit of *Différance* is not apparent in English, since it is meant as a play on *French* words. There are several parts to the theory of *Différance*, but generally speaking it is a manner of interpretive deconstruction that plays, in the French, on the passivity and contextual dependency of signifiers, of words, phrases. The argument is that *meaning* is always *deferred* because it depends on a chain of signifiers, no word/symbol can *mean* wholly out of context. In terms of culture, all the parts contained have meaning determined within the framework of the language, the discourse, of that world. Now, since a Body is always the site of multiple worlds, this conclusion is not overly comforting, or breath-taking, sounding like a repetition of Heidegger’s notion of ‘the prison house of language’, or of the philosopher’s forcing of language to seek the truth of the sense.

However, Derridean *Différance*, the establishment of meaning through chains of signification is, in addition to passivity, about spacing, hence the implicit double-entendre of the word, which locates the French ‘*a*’ (has) inside the audibly exact ‘*difference*’, which, like in English, indicates otherness, a space between two objects, whether ontic (non-being) or ontological (being). In the process of developing meaning the signifier is weighed against other known signifiers, and in comparing the differences a trace is left behind of the alterity of the word, the

¹⁷ Badiou, *Conditions*, 23.

signifier. We will see soon that these series of traces, which lay outside of the chain of signifiers, are prior inexistent, they can be used with Events to crash the Symbolic order and enter the Real.

The Real, the ontological Authentic, is outside of language, it resists symbolization, and thus can only be imaginary. Because it lay outside of language we cannot think it, imagine it, it is singular and whole because undifferentiated, unlike the Symbolic, or, reality/world, which is marked by differentiation, by *Différance*. The Real is revealed only by a traumatic break in the chain of signifiers of that reality, that Symbolic order. In other words the Real, the underlying truth, is revealed not through language but only through an Event external to this world, something traumatic must occur for the truth of that world to be revealed, to be retro-actively communicated as what was a symbolic component of that culture: "An exception is required. An exception both to the axioms of the multiple and to the transcendental constitution of objects and relations."¹⁸ Such a traumatic event could possibly be major political and social upheaval, such as happens in the nostalgic memory of a diaspora or 'post' society, or, in our case spontaneous public Protest. The realization of the truth of the culture cannot occur through existing and operative language, which is why an event external to that discourse must occur in order to be able to critically assess and re-negotiate the political presence...after all, the supposed essence of democratic society.

Conclusion

In his short treatise with Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, Alain Badiou recalls the myth of the death of Archimedes, one of the most brilliant minds of the ancient world, and an insurgent against Roman occupation of his hometown, Syracuse. According to the legend, one day Archimedes is on the beach conducting an experiment in the sand when a Roman soldier arrives with word

¹⁸ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 360. "Il y faut une exception. Une exception tant aux axiomes du multiple qu'à la constitution transcendantale des objets et des relations."-Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes*, 380.

for Archimedes that the Roman General Marcellus requests his presence. Archimedes replies that he will come when he has finished his thoughts in the sand. The soldier repeats his demand several times, with Archimedes refusing to go until he is done with his thought. So infuriated at the apathy of Archimedes towards the General, the soldier strikes Archimedes, killing him, and his thought, as it 'eventually, melts into the sea'.¹⁹

The point of the Archimedes story for Badiou, and reminiscent of Henry David Thoreau, is that it demonstrates the gap between power and thought, the rights of the state (any state) and thinking as truth, or rather, the 'Event' of the paradoxical, creative mind. For Badiou, a new truth (and a reality/subjectivity from that) can emerge on condition that such a space exists between dialogues in which there is no commonality, where there is a discursive, dialectical paradox, not an argument of (institutionalized democratic [bureaucratic]) particularities. Furthermore, this gap must be presented, actualized, through an 'Event' that demands choice. Can a spontaneous, public Protest fulfill this radicality? Yes, I believe so. It is the space between Protest and established democratic channels that gives Protest its power to reach beyond the Truths of the present, to say something outside the voice of the established consensus. Democracy as an institution cannot do this. Democracy as institution is meant to provide stability and conformity to norms as accepted by the majority.

Thoreau in his essay "Civil Disobedience" calls for a stateless society, in response to his claim that states exist for the purpose of military might and are paradoxical to thought, an idea clearly evident in the example of Archimedes and Badiou's 21st century post-state, Evental paradigms. The question then is whether an extra-'worldly'[democratic] (discourse) confrontation, between power and thinking, can in fact be made evident *via* the spontaneous public Protest (especially considering the state's influence on media)? Furthermore, are the recent Protests signs of the move towards a plural, post-state society, a whole new political paradigm developing for this century, but which we cannot

¹⁹ A. Badiou & S. Žižek, ed. P. Engelmann, trans. P. Thomas & A. Toscano, *Philosophy in the Present* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009): 5-7.

yet comprehend/categorize? In short, do recent street actions actually represent a new politics? If so, how susceptible is it to sublimation by the existing order? If not, then how can street protests, spontaneous public Protest, develop a political truth? Reaching through Foucault's bio-politics back to the great anti-philosopher Nietzsche, we must turn our body into an object for knowledge in order to find truth,²⁰ or, Protest!

²⁰ See F. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887).