

Ethics and political discourse in democracy

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To begin with, politics is constituted by the everpresent unity of Law and Power, insofar as speaking and desiring subjects have to deal with each other within a group. However, this definition is *not* sufficient because politics is also a *historical* category, i.e. etymologically speaking, bound to the polis. Certainly a relation between Law and Power exists also in archaic and traditional societies, as well as in interpersonal relationships (of erotic, friendly, or other kind). But prepolitical relations and micropolitics cannot replace politics in the proper sense. The latter is organized around power games and struggles, but, what is more, it requires Law and Reason, i.e. the existence of public, violence-free situations, which are mediated by speech, whereas the actors involved must be individuals, emancipated from exclusive family and particularistic loyalties.

These struggles vary and they often imply some degree of inequality between conflicting actors. This inequality, whether of real or imaginary nature, requires rationalization and justification patterns. Yet in comparison to inequality, the concept of *exclusion* seems to be more important; so there are many degrees of exclusion; to make history and to simultaneously be the subject suffering from history, requires from the subject a continuous effort to overcome the exclusion (which is a social symptom).

It should be noted that it is above all the *will* to overcome exclusion, which characterizes democratic politics. Yet this cannot be done at any price; what is at stake is the way, the »how«, a group or a society tries to overcome exclusion, the point being that another exclusion may thus be brought about. Besides, to overcome the exclusion means to eliminate the *excluded rest* by an appropriate symbolic operation, which substitutes the rest for the acceptance of the lack. It also means an endless *process* which does not sweep away the symbolic differences; for they persist and we know that there is no lucky end of the lack. But struggle must be distinguished from war: struggle carried out with means implying the symbolic order is possible and cannot be eliminated from history, whereas war, often practically unavoidable, is however eliminable and it always represents a cultural regression.

On the other side an adequate formulation of the Law would be: »*Not anything*

is possible«, i.e. psychoanalytically speaking, that the Mother is for all men and women the supreme Good as well as the impossible, forbidden Thing. Thus the Law protects the subjects from depression and selfdestruction, insofar as they are confronted with the hole of the Real. It means that they are also protected by the symbolic *Difference* in opposition to the imaginary *polarity* as well as to the equally imaginary *totality/unity*.

As a consequence, Law is *not* identical with *Power* and political conflict (antagonism). Politics can be just determined by the *tension* between Law and Power: the former stems from the Symbolic, the latter from the Imaginary. Concrete, positive law is always overdetermined by power relations, but this does not exhaust the situation, nor does it occur without contradictions. Besides, there always exists a »*struggle for Right*«, i.e. the struggle for the realization of human rights. The latter can only be grounded on a concept of Law and Justice as well as on its difference with Power; on the other side they (the rights) *cannot* be reduced to interests. Obviously we reject here the position of Carl Schmitt, from whom politics is defined as the relation between *friend* and *foe/enemy*, i.e. through a pure imaginary relation. However the space of politics is always constructed by power antagonisms and *contingencies*.

This concept of Law and politics brings to the fore the question of their absence in Marxian theory. On the one side, Marx has not developed an adequate concept of Law and human subject; on the other side, he oscillates between an economistic determinism and a political historicism. The refusal of economism, however, should not lead to the opposite error: to an onesided »*politicism*« and a voluntaristic absoluteness of politics. Economics *cannot* be reduced to politics and vice versa. This hangs on the concept of *contradiction*; since Lacan we are *no* more obliged to interpret this concept in a usual Hegelian manner, i.e. *no* final conciliation in human history is claimed. But *no* antagonistic, violent, dualistic war is fatal as well. *Contradiction* and *mediation* are categories of the Symbolic, which always occurs on a real background. However, it is *not* necessary for Symbolic and Real to regress back to imaginary forms of polarity, so as to destroy an entire society.

According to an onesided and absolutistic interpretation of politics, as a form of antagonism, violence might be thought of as harmless. But it is just the *myth of violence* that marks the problematic aspect of the positions of Marx, Sorel and Lenin, since it revealed their apocalyptic-manichean character. A radical democratic politics cannot rule out Reason; so far this has been the core problem of all revolutionary politics, especially when the deified »*Reason*« (like the terror dominated period during the French revolution). In this case voluntaristic politics substituted for religion, whereas the revolutionaries' desire was suffocated within perverse enjoyment during the decapitation ritu-

als. The same occurred during the era of Stalin, Pol Pot and occurs nowadays with the »shining path«.

The »new social movements« can be perceived as a form of an actual radical democratic politics; the traditional class question is not as manifestly relevant as in the past, but it has not disappeared in the developed countries, it must only be reformulated. The significance of these movements does not stem from their value relativism and the contingency of their forms. In fact they didn't arise out of thin air, since they are bound to traditional emancipatory movements through an interplay of continuity and distanciation. So they are marked through ambivalences and contradictions.

The social movements should not be overestimated and idealized; insofar as they are driven by antagonistic, particularistic interests and fundamentalisms, they are repeating the »errors« of older movements. Their pluralism is not a sufficient criterion, whether they have overcome the blindness of a supposedly integrated subject.

The social movements which have always raised radical democratic demands, have also insisted on the right of being different. Yet, for the most part, they have an empiristic conception of difference, which implies ambiguities and ambivalences; for instance blacks often stand against whites, women against men, homosexuals against heterosexuals and vice versa. It is true also that extreme rightist and xenophobic movements are also insisting on the right of being different; but they mean the war of one race against the other race and of one nation against the other. Thus everybody is defending its own particularistic interests against all the other. In this case we have to do with imaginary differences (in plural). What is overlooked is that other Difference (in singular), which stems from the Symbolic and splits every subject. The subject can articulate its own discourse only within the psychoanalytic setting (and its equivalents), because it must first resign from putting always the blame on the other in order to explain its own discontent.

The difference between the Right and the Left in political discourse stems from the symbolic language of the French Revolution, but one can apply this difference retrospectively to those cases which concern the political struggles between dominant and dominated groups. The political struggle between the right and the left is not primary; it has always something imaginary, due to the dualistic conflict between the two groups. But it is the *difference* which arises from the exclusion of various groups and individuals that is primary. This difference will remain relevant, as long as such exclusions persist.

On the other side there exist also concurrential conflicts within rightist and leftist groups themselves: they have to be considered as pure imaginary duels. In an imaginary way, the excluded (whether they are the majority of the

population, or minorities, or a single individual) *represent* on the social level that *real rest*, which everybody has to confront subjectively. Conversely the excluded may also project their own exclusion phantasmatically on the other: to every racism corresponds an inverted racism.

It is not easy to speak correctly about politics, at least because there exist other fields of human activities as well, though involving it; voluntarists have always tried to expand politics everywhere and so to discover it at all places; the same occurs with the difference between the right and the left. But if all our actions have some political consequences, it is *not* true that every action is intrinsically »political«: this is an important distinction.

A section of the left has traditionally developed a totalitarian relation to political action, insofar it repeatedly propagated the slogan »anything is political«, i.e. power games. This fundamentalist left is totalitarian, because it identifies politics with a total super-ego; but this is a demand which necessarily destroys both politics and ethics. Here a question arises: from which point of view do we want to evaluate left actions and attitudes, from a political or from an ethical point of view? Besides, there is also another question: does there exist »pure« politics and »pure« ethics?

Since antiquity, these two fields are related in a contradictory and »impossible« way. To be sure, efforts were made often to overcome the tension between ethical and political discourse through causal reductionism. So in classical antiquity: ethics was a duplication of politics, an ethics of civic virtues. But the opposite was also to the fore: a politicization of ethics or rather of religion. Jewish and Christian currents and sects tried to impose a theocratic or apocalyptic politics, in order to equalize various differences under a common denominator, an attitude which implied fanaticism and violence. Traditional left reproduced these two reductions, dominated as it were by a tyrannical super-ego.

However there is no politics without intrigues, power games and the pleasure taken out of them, polemics, lovelessness and the primacy of activism (if not actionism): all these features are imaginary, phallic attributes. In opposition to these the ethics of love ought to be mentioned, i.e. to listen to the word of the Other, to be ready to accept his own weaknesses and his desires. This also implies a keeping clear from such statements as »everything is possible to be done by action«, »act self-consciously!«, »realize yourself!«.

As to the first question, one can begin with saying that the political difference between the right and the left has ceased to play a central role since left wing party politics has assimilated right wing party politics and vice versa. Another reason has been the undetermining of traditional class division in the devel-

oped countries through the upward mobility of various social strata. Our theses here are the following:

- 1) Politics *cannot* exist without one (or more) visible difference, which constitutes it, otherwise it would disappear in an imaginary »unity of the people«. But, in opposition to what has happened until now, this difference should not be constituted as an imaginary polarity. As we mentioned above, this difference by itself does not define politics.
- 2) In the living political culture there exists a difficulty to define a new *visible* political difference. Many people think they could substitute for political differences a moral criterion. So they believe that a »true leftist« is a »moral man or woman«. Despite the fact that no politics is possible on a pure moral level, such an assertion promotes furthermore the traditional self-deification of the left. On the other side, many conservatives and liberals could quite rightly assert the same about themselves.
- 3) Today we all seek the *differentia specifica* of politics. If we are not willing to assume the solution of Carl Schmitt (decisionism and nihilism), we must at least accept the *contingent* character of the political attitude that certain social strata adopt. History teaches us that there were times where the rightists were following a rationalistic line of thought, whereas the leftists were following a romantic one, and vice versa.
- 4) In their mutual opposition both attitudes constitute a splitted unity, which is a trace of the impossible harmony, i.e. the Real. Confronted with the Real, the subjects have to choose between two possibilities: *either* to assume a defensive neurotic or perverse attitude, *or* to recognize the radical lack and not try to avoid it. Politically speaking, the first position is reactionary and antidemocratic, whereas the second one implies a continuous awareness of the openness of society and historical innovation. This distinction displaces the right-left difference by the difference between democracy and non democracy; perhaps this is the content of today's politics. Christians, Jews, liberals and socialists can belong to the democratic camp, whereas religious fundamentalists, extreme leftist sectarians and populists do *not* belong to it, because through their aggressive strategies they are refusing to recognize the Impossible. So they meet here extreme rightists, reactionary conservatives, nationalists and social darwinists. The framework within which politics should be practiced today, ought to be guaranteed from the democratic left together with democratic and liberal right.

Needless to say that we understand ethics in a non-traditional way. Following Lacan the definition of ethical Law is: »You are not allowed to give way on your desire«, i.e. you must get repeatedly through the proof of symbolic

castration and lack. This means also that the above mentioned desire is neither a perverse nor a neurotic one. So, one cannot eliminate the Difference and the lack, in order to instaure purity, harmony and allmightiness. The difference between politics and ethics must remain; politics can only partially be oriented towards the Categorical Imperative; but the presence of the latter cannot dispense with power games, it can only preserve the hope that those games shall be realized without violence and permanent exclusion, and by public and reasonable means.

Desire itself cannot choose in an abstract manner between war and peace, women and men, economy and ecology, national identity and internationalism, representative and direct democracy, market and welfare state, state apparatus and public space, risk society and insurance society, enlightenment and romantics, a.s.o. All these differences are both necessary and uncompleted, whereas their forms can be contingent and historically modified. A feature of traditional, metaphysical thinking was the tendency to find its origins in static dichotomies and polarities, instead of understanding that behind the Difference still exists the Impossible Real, which would annihilate any effort to overcome or to fixate this difference. Usually leftists and alternative movements think in traditional categories. This is because they have been always perceiving themselves as the one side of an imaginary dichotomy: it always has been some manicheanism in this position.

Undoubtedly, it is difficult to develop a conception of left politics based on the Unconscious; this is because the Unconscious lays simultaneously on this side and beyond politics, so that the latter in the most cases must repulse and deny the Unconscious in order to exist. Perhaps political discourse will be always dominated by a binary code, which repulses and denies Death, i.e. the Third, the symbolic Father and the Law, and this is valid also for the left discourse. Apart from this, there is a tendency to play down the sexual difference as well as to dissolve any institution into »communicative acts«; moreover desire is reduced into »needs« very often. This attitude of »levellers« and »political correct« people is however very »in« and is based on the denial of the Real.

Left politics could be defined negatively as the avoidance of all point previously criticized; it cannot be defined solely by power games, nor through the mere cult of ethical values; as we said, the recognition of Law and its tension with Power is the constitutional element of politics. It was especially the Law which was never »popular« among the leftists, because they stood within a Gnostic and apocalyptic tradition, for which the Law was meant to be a mere instrument of domination of the Evil. So they understood the Law (in all of its forms) in an empiristic and positivistic manner, whereas the utopians dreamed of the »totally other« Law, which revealed itself in reality to be a totalitarian Law, since it eliminated every distinction, difference and lack.

Democracy is the authentic form of politics, but always in an imperfect way; in everyday life it often means the sweeping away of the Law and the acceptance of the war of all against all. It is a form of social Darwinism which is at stake here as well as a variant of »aesthetic Darwinism«, especially widespread among left intellectuals. On the other side democracy stays and falls with the chance for Truth to find its place within it. Empirists use to deny this question and they are mentioning the catastrophic consequences of the dictatorship of the »one«, orthodox truth. But this is not a valid argument against the existence of a partial, historical truth, and this is our question here. Traditional leftist have always oscillated between a tactical denial of the truth and its dogmatic reification, so as to be unable to discover a third solution. This is also connected with their relation to institutions, always rejected by them. The latter attitude led them to a total, idealistic refusal of power (as long as they were in the opposition) and to the denial of the difference between democracy and totalitarian institutions.

As far as the intellectuals are concerned, it is very problematic from them to be assumed as »mythmakers«, in the sense of Sorel. Quite the opposite is relevant: *critical* intellectuals should *not* invent any myths, even if the latter were serving democracy. We know how ambivalent and dangerous the democratic and the socialist movements can be, because they often spread populist, nationalist, fundamentalist and antisemitic ideas against the »other«. So, it depends upon historical contingencies whether these tendencies will be realized; but this by no means implies a sort of fatalism. It is only the actuality and the will of the opposite forces, which can keep those destructive tendencies unrealized. We must insist on the ideas of *Reason* and *human rights*, even if, for many postmodernists, they are not fashionable today. They just forget that *one must not give way on his Rights according to Reason*. But we would *not* speak about the »myth of Reason«, which is a nonsense; »Mythos« and »Logos« are not identical with each other, so the question arised here obliges us to take a position against the confusion of concepts.

Myths and ideologies are inevitable. But what does this mean? An anticipated absolution of all our errors? Fantasy and the Imaginary are *not* in themselves ideology; they are a necessary support of splitted subjects, confronted as they are with the unbearable radical lack of the Real. The function of ideology goes *beyond* fantasy because it makes for a duplication: it represents the *illusion of an illusion*. But the aim of *culture and critique* is to overcome ideology again and again, and always partially. If individual everyday fantasies represent an inevitable support of man's and woman's desire (that is the basic illusion), ideology signifies a *supplementary* collective illusion regarding the functioning of those fantasies. Every subject is interpellated to live without ideology; but it *cannot* live without any fantasies at all, which are supporting its desire.

There is a double role to be realized by intellectuals and generally people creative in culture (art, religion, philosophy and science); this means a division between creative *and* critical tasks. Philosophy and psychoanalysis are those discourses which are *radically* questioning myths, as well as everyday ideologies produced by all social groups. If this critical function is missing its goal, then we have to do with »ideologists«, i.e. producers of ideology, who reproduce existent power relations and illusions. This is true also if these people seem to be »progressive« or »alternative«. Critique always means *selfcritique* too (which of course reaches the limits of politics and goes beyond it).

Furthermore, persons who are dealing with culture are creative. One can be creative in two senses: either in an analytical or in a metaphorical sense; in the first case we have to do with *Logos*, in the second one with *Mythos*. Analytical discourse becomes manifested as the critical theory of the values, whereas the metaphorical discourse is manifested itself in fiction and poetry. Here the concepts of mythos and logos should be liberated from a secular and sterile controversy which put them in opposition to each other. This controversy occurs insofar as reason and poetry can drift in the imaginary, when they establish a lack of freedom. In this case we are speaking of »instrumental« instead of *critical* reason; besides, there exists a radical difference between »obscurantistic« and violent myth, which seduces the subject into the belief in fetishes, masters and enemies, and *poetical* myth. Of course all these forms can coexist.

Here we have to do with a double distinction; between these four ideal typical cases there exists a transition. Psychoanalysis itself teaches us how to deal with Logos (theory) as well as with Mythos (the laws and formations of the Unconscious). In the cultural field artists and writers are producing myths, but *not* ideology, insofar as they are not totally dependent on the mass media. But these myths are circumscribing the real lack without making a fetish out of it. Therefore ideology is that discourse which is reproducing violent and obscurantistic myths as well as the instrumental rationality of modernity, precisely both on the right and on the left side of the political spectrum.

Finally, we must proceed towards the actual postmodern crisis of politics as well as of the Law. There are a lot of reasons for it and we would like to mention some of them. The domination of the discourses of knowledge under the form of developmental, productivist and consumerist ideology implies the repulsion of non material and non utilitarian values. Politics is here reduced to objective administration of interests, so that the symbolic dimension of the Law has disappeared from the terrain of politics; thus the latter is loosing its aura and is becoming banalised. Moreover, a certain leftist, antiauthoritarian, hysterical critique led to a denial of the Law, because it rejected every demand for certain rules and differences as authoritarian.

At the same time the symbolic function of the Father, the Name-of-the-Father has been discredited. These tendencies have been diffused at the level of everyday ideologies and mentalities, both from liberals and leftists, whereas the mass media popularized them. This didn't remain without consequences. People, especially the young people, do not expect a change in their life from the political groups and the trade unions. The crisis of the Law and of the name of the father implies also a general increase of anomy, criminality and cynicism. So, many people are taking refuge into a defensive attitude, which favors anew hard ideologies like mysticism, nationalism, racism and fundamentalism. There is a danger here for politics to disappear through the rise of a new discourse of the master and of hysteria, thus reproducing obscurantistic and violent myths.

The way out of this blind alley is a detour: politics *cannot* be understood out of itself, it exists only through its symbolic *difference* from culture; actually we are lacking a *new*, persuasive definition of Law. What we need is a non violent cultural revolution or reformation. The difference between politics and culture is important in order to avoid politics to become a *substitute* for religion. Still we must not forget the middle ages division between the state and the church, which has been the first condition of England's and Europe's freedom. So »politics is not all« and »*not everything is politics*«, there still exists something »else«.

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