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Traumatic or Utopian Other? Conditions of Emancipation: Phantasy, Reality, and Depression

In this presentation I will try to approach the questions of utopia, otherness, and what liberation and redemption could possibly mean, from the perspective of fantasy. Fantasy necessarily seems to inspire terms like utopia and otherness as horizons for the idea of emancipation, but it also infects them with the haunting suspicion that they are merely fictional. There will be no utopia without fantasy, but fantasy is also the reason why utopia remains simply utopia and cannot be realised. However, this does not entail that utopia cannot become reality altogether. Something seems to happen in the moment of its realisation that turns utopia traumatic. You might object that not every utopia ends up in trauma, and you would certainly be right; nevertheless, it is not arbitrary that utopia so easily collapses into trauma. At least there seems to be an intrinsic relationality at play between utopia and trauma, and the task will be to understand this relationality, and how it relates in turn to fantasy and reality. What becomes visible here is a symbolic matrix linking utopia and trauma on its vertical axis, and fantasy and reality on its horizontal axis. I will suggest that we should locate all claims to embody or understand emancipation within this matrix. It is the symbolic matrix of emancipation.

To address emancipation from the viewpoint of the symbolic already implies an understanding of politics that is neither purely phantasmatic nor strictly realistic, neither strictly revolutionary nor purely reformist. Politics itself appears here as a symbolic category, for concepts like emancipation are just certain facets of politics: a value or ideal we try to ascribe to our political ambitions and actions. However, ambitions and actions rarely meet their goal, and the fundamental desire motivating them never does – as we learn from psychoanalysis. Any volition deviates on its way into practice, and yet there is no way of thinking political subjectivity outside of volition. If voluntarism represents a limit to any political ambition, it certainly also works as its condition. Without an idea

of subjectivity that is to some extent naïve with respect to the impact and the consequences of one's voluntary actions, no political practice will be possible.¹

The difference between regulative ideas of emancipation and politics, between subjectivity and collectivity, on the one hand, and concrete forms of practice on the other, is decisive here. There is no direct connection or identity between theory and practice, between ideas and their incarnation. Rather, this difference between ideas/ideals and acts/practices is constitutive of the symbolic understanding of politics. Voluntary acts directed towards ideas or ideals – existential ideals like autonomy, authenticity, and sovereignty, communal ideals like equality, justice, and solidarity – have to be performed within a socially symbolic space. In this respect, utopia indicates the final achievement of at least one of these ideals, and trauma its complete loss. Utopia is a fundamental fantasy inseparable from the ideal of emancipation and politics, subjectivity, and collectivity, and even trauma or pure negativity necessarily contain an aspect of fantasy that has to be adjusted towards another idea/ideal: that of reality. Every single act is not only trapped within that symbolic matrix, it also generates this matrix first of all by means of its differentiation and “dynamicisation”. Neither ideas nor practices alone can be considered to be political. Single acts are symbolically determined as political only in and through the relations that structure them. Not only the relation of ideas to practices, but also the relation to other ideas and practices define both the condition and limitation of political practice. However, this structural ambivalence should not be considered the universal condition of power relations as such, as is the case with Foucault and Butler; it rather indicates the conditions of power under certain very specific historical circumstances.

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These historical circumstances are defined by the fact that there is no instance of absolute decision – no God, Emperor, nor Party – that could decide on the

¹ Not even a purely aestheticised gesture, an “*acte gratuit*”, could succeed in this respect, because its transgressive, non-voluntary effect must still be wanted – or the famous, psychotic “*passage à l'acte*”, which seemingly transgresses all symbolic boundaries, can achieve a state of politics beyond volition. Because in order to be understood in any political sense, it has to be interpreted as such, thus realising at least its implicit message or meaningfulness.

achievement of these acts.² These acts remain categorically imaginary, perspectival, and competitive. Any claim, e.g. to universal equality, remains constitutively unequal, a competitive speech act situated against other, similar claims. And any radical gesture shares to some minimal degree the symbolic, institutional, and mediated space of its emergence (e.g. as a lecture or a publication). As a typically modern symbolic formation, politics cannot synchronise content and form; their difference enables the symbolic space of politics. Political acts therefore do not realise the idea or the universal ideal they strive for; rather, the act brings about something else, a particular kind of event that escapes such intentionality. Volition seems to slip constitutively from its imaginary aims into reality despite its best intentions, slipping into the reality of the symbolic – a kind of Heideggerian *Gestell* – which seems to inspire yet another imaginary act of its own overcoming, which in turn must be repeated over and over again.

The paradox of political voluntarism lies in the fact that as voluntarism it has to imagine some sort of result emerging from its competitive actions; actions and practices, however, count as political if and only if they transcend these results. Without the promise of transcendence, politics would just be a question of the correct administrative commitment to following a certain idea, and that is precisely *not* what politics is about. Politics is never only a means; it always also represents ends. Thus, political practices are defined precisely by the lack of any voluntary, controllable, and stabilised meaning. The symbolic matrix of emancipation and/or politics altogether indicates the absence or non-existence of any pre-given normative order, what one might call the big Other. Politics is the symbolic space of that absence or non-existence of unity, stability, and control. Or at least, politics is one of the symbolic formations articulating that absence/non-existence in addition to culture, science, economy, technology, art, and even religion under the conditions of modernity (i.e. at least since the 17th century). Although I do not support one-dimensional secularisation theories, I would prefer the term “absence” compared to non-existence. It does not seem to be the categorical non-existence of a cosmological myth that serves to found any social order, but rather the absence of an inclusive, integrational narrative: a function which supposedly had been fulfilled by magic, myth, and religion in previous eras. The absence of an integrational narrative seems indeed to be

² At least no instance was able to establish itself definitely within the last 500 years of European or even world history.

constitutive of the modern symbolic. Its differentiation into quasi-autonomous fields is the very indicator of that absence. And yet, they can only be understood in their mutual connection, because science and religion, technology and art, politics and economy differentiate themselves in and through acts of mutual and complementary reference.³

In addition to the specific kind of autonomy generated by the fundamental heteronomy of the fields, there is also the claim to hegemony that each field raises against the others. Their claims to autonomy and to hegemony derive from their attempt to *positively* represent the big Other. That means that otherness is always implicitly at play within the modern symbolic. For example, science can be understood as a symbolic formation or matrix making it possible to understand aspects of the world beyond everyday empirical experience. In a similar way, politics performs the symbolic function allowing one to imagine a world beyond the existing normative order, and the possible realisation of utopian ideals, or the overcoming of one's own existential and social conditions or privileges. And art is a symbolic formation that enables a glance into the unknown, unseen, and even unexpected. Obviously, these symbolic determinations are highly ideological. Hence – if the modern symbolic formations do not only indicate the absence of the big Other, but also represent it as being absent – otherness is implicitly always at play within these formations. This direction towards otherness – we might call it an immanent transgression or even transcendence – is intrinsic to modern symbolic forms: a transgression, however, that does not lead to the open horizon beyond the scope of the modern symbolic, but rather represents that scope and continuously expands its reach. There is no fundamental transgression but only continuous displacement between the fields.⁴

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This intrinsic and immanent transgression of the modern symbolic indicates a sort of order that precisely does not work as a strict law defining specific rules that one has to follow or obey. It rather institutes the imaginary in order to break the rules and to articulate alternative rules. Given the absence of a one, uni-

³ Art, e.g., is precisely what science is not, but in order to find out about that difference they have to have some kind of exchange going on, an exchange that is frequently misunderstood as a dissolution of the difference in the name of some trans-category.

⁴ This categorical displacement of transgressive rhetorics in contemporary activist and artistic discourse was the starting point of my project “Phantasm and Politics”, which I organised for the theatre “Hebbel am Ufer”, Berlin, 2013–2015.

versal law for all, every claim towards such universality can be criticised and questioned from other perspectives. Interpellation here does not subject us to the law, but to the production of alternative rules. Thus, the agonistic struggle for such rules between claim and critique defines the horizontal axis of any symbolic matrix, comparable to fantasy and reality, and which is always related to the more antagonistic one between positivity and negativity on the vertical axis. Within such matrices, agonism and antagonism do not define fundamental oppositions; they rather refer to each other, generating the symbolic matrix precisely through their mutual referentiality. Thus, the space of the symbolic does not merely sketch out or map the social space of individual acts; in obstructing the realisation of a true autonomy or hegemony of any single claim, it implicitly always invites and asks for more acts or practices. The symbolic operates on implicit alternatives, always instigating new ones. Hence, we are not suffering from a lack of alternatives – that there is supposedly no alternative – but from an abundance of alternatives. The symbolic frames our actions and volitions always already as alternatives. Paradoxically, the whole symbolic order thus often appears to be without an alternative. However, misunderstood as personal freedom or as the possibility of a meaningful life, alternatives do not resist the existing order but express it. Misrepresenting their own conditions, the search for alternatives keeps us trapped within the narcissistic and competitive aspects of the imaginary.

Within such a theoretical framework, neither politics nor emancipation can be conceived in terms of pure negativity. Politics does not indicate a fundamental rupture or break in relation to the established order or master discourse, since it always also represents that order or discourse. There is an intrinsic positivity at play within every negativity, which is the condition of the symbolic. The existing orders and master discourse should most certainly be questioned and under the right conditions even political voluntarism and organisational power can overthrow existing normativities, replacing them with new ones. This is clearly the case. However, all such attempts remain within the boundaries of the modern symbolic, as I defined it, which frames these attempts and makes them appear desirable. Reformism and radicalism, agonism and antagonism, affirmation and negation; all these only represent the different options within the symbolic matrices of the modern world. To struggle between these options defines politics, and political struggle will always be necessary to aspire to another world, to more social justice, gender equality, a non-racist and non-hetero-normative

world; but obviously *politics is not enough*, if what is at stake is the symbolic as such, because as a historically specific symbolic matrix, politics is already part of that symbolic order, and thus, in order *to think otherwise or other things*, it might be necessary to look beyond the realm of the symbolic formation of politics and search indeed for an “immanent way out,” as Jelica Sumic phrased it.⁵ The problem, however, is not only that the terminological polarities of inside and outside, fantasy and reality, positivity and negativity clearly operate already within the modern symbolic, but that the desire itself to find a way out is part of that same structure. It institutes itself in and through its attempt to find a way out. As an “immanent way”, it has to be rooted within these distinctions, but as “a way out” it would have to be directed towards a state of affairs precisely beyond such distinctions, towards something not merely outside or other, but towards something other than other, or better stated: towards something beyond the distinction of inside and outside, sameness and otherness. This might indeed be a zone of in-distinction or a zone in which the distinctions open up towards new, maybe less polarised multiplicities, or even to a new symbolic. I will, however, not speculate on that here. That is none of my business. And I am not even sure if such a new symbolic would be desirable. A world beyond the specific symbolic formations of modernity – politics, art, culture, science, technology, media, and theory – does not sound very appealing to me. And I neither have a desire to fantasise a new integrational narrative, fabulating some supposed myth beyond myth, a new religion, nor would I like to avoid falling prey to my own private, doctrinal fantasy.

So, obviously, I cannot offer you a way out. I can only sketch out the dimensions of the problem, indicating why politics and voluntarism do not suffice, but are nevertheless indispensable. This is the case not only because politics is part of the struggle for a better life, but also because this struggle is part of the effort to understand its intrinsic potentials and limitations. To grasp the symbolic dimensions of politics and voluntarism alike is crucial for any understanding of emancipation, enlightenment, and radical politics, and in order to challenge their intrinsic limitations and contradictions. Since enlightenment implies a certain en-darkening, some sort of trauma, or at least a crucial dependency

⁵ Jelica Sumic, “Politics and Psychoanalysis in Times of the Inexistent Other”, in: Samo Tomšič, Andreja Zevnik (eds.), *Jacques Lacan, Between Psychoanalysis and Politics*, Routledge, London, New York 2016, pp. 28–42.

inside utopia and some implicit conformity within radicalism.⁶ Therefore, emphasising the symbolic dimension of politics does not mean neglecting its real dimension, or preferring a moderate version of politics. My point is rather that politics can only be *symbolically* radical and this binds radicality to its reformist or consensual alternative. A *radical* immanent way out would therefore ask again for a state of affairs beyond the difference of radicalism and reformism – and thus would no longer be simply radical. But there is doubtlessly something to be done before we reach such a state, because its precondition – in order to not simply fantasise reality and/or radicalism – would be to differentiate utopia from trauma, fantasy from reality, and radicalism from reformism. Not to overcome, “sublate”, or abolish such dichotomies, but to sharpen their differences and possible relations on the grounds of their historical, social, and cultural implementations and realisations. This clearly can only happen as a work within the symbolic and leads back to the question of the kind of subject that would be capable of achieving this state of reflexion and integrity within its political voluntarism.

Methodologically, as preconditions for such a reconstruction of the conditions and relations of political voluntarism – as it appears necessarily within any idea of emancipation, enlightenment, or radical politics – I would suggest two essential concepts. Firstly, a post-Lacanian understanding of the symbolic order, and secondly, a post-Kleinian conception of the relation between phantasy⁷ and reality as being fundamental to any understanding of subjectivities and collectivities. Post-Lacanian in this perspective means: unlinking the symbolic – Lacan’s great innovation – from a direct relation between structural anthropology, linguistics, and the psyche. This is necessary in order to open up the diachronic or historical dimension of the symbolic. This historical dimension, however, is crucial to understanding the specificities of the modern symbolic, how it can instigate otherness by means of permanent change, improvement, reform, and revolution. Therefore, we have to relate the category of the symbolic order to the main sociological theories of modernity or modernisation as field or system theories. It is here that we gain an understanding of the specific symbolic formations of the modern world. However, these theories do not un-

⁶ That is why I am not so interested in how radical one can be, but more in the way one would perform conformity within the proclaimed radicalism.

⁷ Klein writes phantasy with a ph. From now on I will refer to her term.

derstand their own categories as symbolic. There are indeed the *fields* of politics, art, science, law, culture, psychology, or economy, but they are organised neither by pure internal relationality nor by strict functional differentiation. They are rather shaped by symbolic mobilisation through continuous acts of differentiation and “dynamicisation” by means of mutual, complementary operations, thus realising more and more subfields, which increasingly become semi-autonomous fields themselves. Thus, the diachronic does not oppose the synchronicity of the structures of the symbolic order; it rather defines these structures in a specifically modern way. In this sense, there is no clear distinction between the social and historical, on the one hand, and the symbolic, on the other. The social and the historical are clearly part of the modern symbolic. In a certain sense, history and society even define the meta-structures or meta-fields of the modern world, within which the specific fields of science, politics, art, culture, law, economy, technology, media and even theory might establish themselves. The single fields are always organised around a singularised, generalised, and highly substantialised term: such as *art*, *politics*, *science* or *culture*⁸; and the practices in these fields try to enact and to perform the identity assigned by their respective term. However, incapable of integrating their identities, and slipping from their idealised goals, they generate the symbolic matrices by structuring the crucial oppositions in each field, like the opposition between utopia and trauma, fantasy and reality, in the case of the subfield of emancipation within the wider field of politics. Thus they create specific contents for the terms art, politics, or culture, showing as such specific historical and cultural imprints; in the case of utopia and trauma, for example, their opposition can be clearly localised within the tradition of the messianic and/or apocalyptic thinking of the Judeo-Christian world. In this tradition, redemption and damnation appear as strictly related to a decisive event; reality as we experience it in everyday life is nothing other than a sheer deceit, and subjectivity is constructed through acts of belief and not through knowledge or feeling. Hence, their universalism is always already historically and culturally specific, a particular kind of universalism. One cannot sever utopia from trauma, because the decision on their relational difference is not ours to make.⁹

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⁸ My theoretical approach is essentially motivated by an attempt to understand the function of these terms and the problem they indicate that we cannot get rid of.

⁹ I think it is precisely this aspect, which should be reflected more clearly within the aftermath of that tradition in contemporary political philosophy. Especially in terms of the model of Pascal’s wager: that there is nothing to be lost but everything to be won seems

The most fundamental question, however, in relation to this specific “historicist” view of the symbolic is whether there is an underlying principle that generates and directs these symbolic operations in terms of differentiation and “dynamicisation”. Is there something we could consider to be real and not symbolic, or even “real” in the Lacanian sense? History – in the Marxian understanding of “real history as a mere sequence of class struggles” – and capital have frequently been appealed to in this regard. With respect to history, I think, it is relatively easy to show that it is precisely its symbolic form as a “sign of the modern” (Nicolas B. Dirks) that allows for its conception of a universal principle, but a more historicist and symbolic perspective seems possible for capital as well. This is the case not only because any claim as to the “real”, as important as it is as a theoretical category, becomes imaginary in its act of enunciation and thereby inscribes itself into the symbolic, but also, more concretely, if we refer to the argument of the British Marxist historians Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood, the specificity of capital relations can only be grasped within agrarian capitalism, which only developed in the 17th century. This argument clearly indicates that capital relations are effects of and not reasons for the modern symbolic order.

For this reason, I do not see any way to overcome, outdo, or bypass the symbolic; it rather seems to constitute the condition for the very understanding of any practice and any theory as being political. The last question of my presentation concerns how voluntarism here comes into play. A post-Kleinian perspective understands voluntarism as a way of not only articulating politics within the symbolic order, but perhaps also hints at the politics of that order itself. Within the history of psychoanalysis, Melanie Klein, her school, and the whole post-Kleinian field represent a very specific and genuine position, and that means more than a mere “fleshing out” between Freud and Lacan, as Jacqueline Rose phrased it in her essays on a “Return to Melanie Klein” from the early 1990s.¹⁰ These specificities mainly concern three aspects: phantasy as the

to be especially problematic: because obviously a lot of being might be lost, especially in such case the utopian bet turns into trauma.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? – Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Return to Melanie Klein*, Blackwell, Oxford (UK), Cambridge (MA) 1993.

crucial term of the whole concept, a very particular understanding of the Ego, and finally, a special emphasis on forms of collectivity, essentially the group.¹¹

The Kleinian concept of “unconscious phantasy” is almost identical to the unconscious itself. As such, phantasy becomes a fundamental concept, which distinguishes it clearly from the Freudian fantasy, which concerns mainly the wishful thinking of children, poets, and neurotics, as well as from the Lacanian *fantasme* understood as a strictly defensive screen protecting one from the real. Kleinian phantasies are immediately productive and are not necessarily related to any lack (one can thus see the attraction of the concept for Deleuze and Guattari). However, something seems to happen between different phantasies: especially with the transition from the direct alteration of love and hate phantasies, typical of the paranoid-schizoid position, to phantasies of grief, guilt, and an overwhelming sadness at the beginning of the depressive position. With grief, guilt, and sadness aspects of retrospection and reflexion emerge. The Ego of the depressive position is still clearly a phantasy – a phantasy, however, trying to integrate its split inner and outer objects, to reflect its own orally-sadistic impulses, and the destructive, ruinous effects they generated, and finally to repair or compensate for these effects. Obviously, there is no stable identity waiting at the end of this process; further splitting is lurking everywhere, and the phantasies of integration, reflexivity, and reparation might even be implemented only by further acts of splitting.

Hence, the Kleinian Ego, as it shows up in the depressive position, is neither a pure pleasure Ego nor a mere reality Ego; it can neither be understood as autonomous nor as completely decentred. As an essentially depressed Ego, it learns to distinguish inside and outside, projection from introjection, partial object and total object/person, but only at the price of grief, guilt, and sadness. Phantasy here is not just limited by some outer reality – a reality principle; it rather produces all too many realities, which seemingly collapse within the essential psychotic core of our psychological existence. However, the Ego recognises different phantasies, it opens a marginal space between them, and thus learns to distinguish the sheer categories of phantasy and reality – a phantasy-phantasy

¹¹ For a discussion of the political dimension of Kleinian thought, see: Eli Zaretsky, “Melanie Klein and the emergence of modern personal life”, in: John Phillips, Lindsey Stonebridge (eds.), *Reading Melanie Klein*, Routledge, London, New York 1998, pp. 32–50.

and a reality-phantasy. Thus, the Ego is not a complete illusion and its reality is not a total deceit. But at the same time, it is not much more.¹² Precisely because reality is essentially phantasmatic, it cannot be recognised as such by pure thought. *Reality has to be felt* by the Ego in order to distinguish its more or less phantasized moments. It is the “Ego feeling”, to allude to Paul Federn’s discussion in 1925,¹³ in and through which phantasy and reflexion can be separated from each other, a separation that makes possible a reality that is not merely a phantasy.

Thus, this Ego has to be phantasized, but it does not represent a mere phantasy. But neither does it constitute a purely reflexive, rational instance; it has to be essentially felt. Finally and most importantly, the Ego’s reality cannot be its own possession. There is no way that reality is just *my* reality – if that were the case, it would be a total phantasy. Through moments of projection and introjection and the exchange of inner objects in various object relations, the Kleinian Ego is thoroughly social. That is why neither liberal individualism nor radical collectivism, neither strict particularism nor unconditional universalism, adequately characterise the options here. It is rather the group as a specifically social entity in and through which individualism and collectivism, particularism, and universalism find themselves mediated. In Wilfred Bion’s concept of group analysis this approach has even found a clinical form. And I would suggest, to explore its political implications, it is the group and not the master who is the political agent here.

Within this scenario the subject of politics cannot be understood as being completely de-centred, de-individualised, and de-psychologised. It remains essentially psychological, but at the same time socially and culturally mediated in many ways. The group does not transcend or erase individuality; it remains dependent on its deliberate ambitions. Therefore, political subjectivity is not tainted by moments of integration, individuality, and psychology. Rather, such moments have to be performed in order to articulate any kind of voluntarism. This voluntarism therefore is not naive, but highly fragile, offering only within

¹² Kleinians, e.g., are the most ardent critics of a scientific understanding of objective reality. You can still find that in Jacqueline Rose. And there is a fundamental lack of understanding in terms of the symbolic formations; this was Lacan’s critique.

¹³ Paul Federn, “Das Ichgefühl im Traume”, in: Paul Federn, *Ichpsychologie und die Psychose*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1978, pp. 53–83.

its most precious and precarious moments the possibilities of distinction between phantasy and reality, utopia and trauma. Voluntarism has to invest in “traversing the phantasies”, one might say, in terms of their integrational, reflexive, and emotional capacities, capacities that are at the very core of any understanding of emancipation. Essentially, this voluntarism is based on a “will” directed less towards power and enjoyment than towards survival and to the endurance of the depressive conditions of its being. However, such a post-Kleinian approach has to be related to the category of the symbolic, i.e. the “topology” of the symbolic order, as I have tried to sketch it. Voluntarism can become political voluntarism only in relation to the symbolic category of politics. In this understanding, neither politics nor voluntarism appear as mere means to achieve certain goals, e.g. of otherness, authenticity, or equality; they always already represent these goals within different symbolic matrices (the matrix of politics and the matrix of the psyche). The invocations of the symbolic towards permanent change, alternatives, and otherness work in both matrices. They operate as two different sorts of phantasies, which allow these invocations to be both articulated and reflected. This perspective avoids either the imaginary identification of politics and voluntarism in the sense of a will to power or enjoyment or the strict separation of these categories. The symbolic, as I have here construed it, does not simply integrate all perspectives, but functions as a necessary precondition for the possibility of any qualification of thought. Neither politics nor voluntarism exhaust the symbolic as such. Doubtless, another turn against themselves might indeed be needed in order to further reflect, to mourn and to repair their own intrinsic transcendence. However, such a turn should not be understood in terms of political negativity, but only in terms of a more fundamental political negation of politics, and a volition turned towards the involuntary. Thus, a political voluntarism might appear in the categorical slippage from politics and volition alike. The uncontrollability of such an event could perhaps be conceived as an *aesthetics of implosion*, performing and reflecting the subversion of the symbolic invocations, while at the same time maintaining their emancipatory achievements.