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1968 and after

Some Comments on Singularity and Minoritarian Politics

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In 1977, Foucault wrote: "Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable."[1] By rejecting the bureaucrats of the revolution and the gloomy passions of the militants, Foucault sought to conjure up the complex of positive political symptoms that characterized 1968. For him, the political awakening of 1967/1968 represented more than a second Freudo-Marxist golden age; it stood for an incision into the political itself, in that a changed analysis of power came together with a changed model of rebellion. This incision was, in theoretical terms, the rejection of a conceptualization of power structured around a law of progressive valorization, that is not clear to the subjects themselves and that is guaranteed by a repressive state apparatus. In practical terms, it was the rejection of a politics primarily oriented towards a directive Party, the organizing of a class and the destruction of a state apparatus that would be accompanied by the construction of a proletarian state power. In short, it was the rejection of the strategic guidelines of the Marxist theory of the state and the primacy of repression and ideology in the conceptualization of power. The events of 1968 saw

the emergence of a new political potentiality that had left the Leninist model of revolution behind. This potentiality lay in a minoritarian and molecular model of the break and intensified around the question of how various forms of desire traversing a situation unfold their forces and can become more intense in the process by which the societal order is overthrown. One of the central controversies surrounding this political agenda was of course how to deal with the problematic concept of desire: what it is, what we understand by it and in what conditions it exists. Deleuze, who has worked most intensively on the issue of minority and desire, talks about a-subjective forces that are currently linked in a historically specific way and that transcend the situation they traverse. This presents him with the theoretical difficulty of having conceived an assumed constituent power which, at the same time, he tries to correct. For him, desire is never spontaneous or natural ; it is historically determined and is the effect of its own assemblages, whereby he comes close to a circular argument.2

In the developments after 1968, it became clear that this model of minoritarian politics attributed too much significance to the de-territorializing, unleashing, progressive element of capitalism, still conceived in terms of a collapse that was intrinsically bound up with capitalism and corresponding to the idea that this same capitalism would, one day, no longer be able to commodify the desire eternally mobilized by it, and to integrate it into the societal order. It had become clear, furthermore, that there had been a dangerous merging of the minoritarian and the cadre model into whose discipline very different historical developments had gained entry, of which the urging of messianism with its notion of a great confrontation of oppressors and oppressed was as much a part as the Blanquism of the eighteenth century3, the anarcho-syndicalist will for direct action and the concept of the dictatorship of the

proletariat, developed in view of the failure of the French revolution of 1848 and the Paris Commune.[4] This merging of minoritarian politics with discipline led to a mobilization of life at every level: daily meetings, relentless activism, the politicization of every form of expression. As a result, there was enormous pressure to achieve, which drove many militants away from the political. Just as the post-Fordist mode of subjectivation, working to transform life into a production unit of signification and style, results in exhaustion and fatigue, the demand to see everything in political terms can also produce unforeseeable stresses, especially when it takes on disciplinary and moral characteristics. At the same time, at the opposite end of the spectrum from discipline and indeed driven by it, the connection between minoritarian politics and easily commercialized modes of life in subcultures and pop culture evolved. In order to identify these points of transition and thresholds between modes of resistance and modes of power, it is necessary to address the problematic issue of how the different movements of the Left have politicized life not just since the 1960s, but even before that: through the influence of the *Lebensreform* movements of the turn of the century; through the avant-garde movements with their mission to do away with the separation between art and life; or, still earlier, through the vitalist and anthropological content in Marx's thinking, as it appears in the concept of living labour as a form-giving fire and constituent potentiality of the generic human being. In Rancière's work of the last ten years,[5] there are important references to the fact that this merging of politics and life, accompanied by both minoritarian connections, had its origins in the conceptualization of aesthetic education in the work of Schiller. After the failure of the French Revolution, he recognized the task of shaping individuals capable of living in a free community. This idea was immediately adopted as part of the German Romantic enterprise led by Schlegel,

Hölderlin and Hegel. Rancière analyses how the aesthetic idea of the sensual fulfilment of an as yet latent humanity gave rise to a new concept of political revolution. By the beginning of the twentieth century, this would permit the "brief though decisive encounter between the architects of the Marxist revolution and the architects of the new ways of life"6 that started from the assumption of a vital, undivided mode of human experience, already containing within it the essence of the coming community.

After 1968, the practices of minoritarian politics gradually broke away from a programme of radical societal change and a communist project in the broadest sense of the term. Today, only two forms, either deficient or transformed, of this change have any effect (all the other connections have been cut or remain purely virtual): the production of commercial ways of life and the production of essentialist communities. This paradoxically successful failure of a cycle of militant struggle has emerged from the interplay of expanded forms of valorization and more sophisticated liberal government strategies. Both anticipate dissident practices that depart from social norms and then integrate them in a positive manner. In his essay "Three concepts of politics"7, Étienne Balibar describes how, in the structure formed by capitalist valorization and biopolitical strategies acting in concert, two extreme identitarian forms are generated; neither is liveable and so both tend to be extremely violent. One consists in totally fixing and disambiguating subjectivity, the other in totally liquefying and flexibilizing it. Today, both strategies take place simultaneously and form a conflictual field within which each intensifies the other.8

What has brought about this failure of minoritarian politics? Why was there such integration and transformation of minoritarian militancy after 1968? Poststructuralist theory formation provides two clues. Firstly, despite all the differences, this theory formation

assumes that what we call capitalist socialization cannot be attributed to the dynamic of *one* of the contradictions inherent in social relations. Instead, sociality is understood as a strategic situation, in which practices of valorization, discipline and mobilization of bodies as well as of the government of population and goods are connected, and meet an evasion of those forces, which they try to subjugate, mobilize or govern, a process of withdrawal sometimes as far as movements of organized resistance. This situation lies open to endless variation, renewal and recombination. Secondly, with the analysis of body politics and government policy, which mobilize life in a realm of value and utility, poststructuralism departed from Marx's anthropological and political legacy; it assigned the meaning of the hidden essence (*das Eigentliche*) to the human being and to class, to the real definition of being, i.e. to cooperative and free-associated practice. For Marx, the collective forces of humanity were already in existence, reified in the false form of capitalist production.

In recent decades, a particular line of argument regarding the failure of 1968 has become established in post-Marxist debate, which reduces minoritarian politics to its failure and defines it as an ideological supplement to capitalism. By being interpreted as an ideological call to permanent self-revolution, minoritarian politics appears as the integration of movements of capital. A favourite figure in this equating of molecular politics with deficient forms of it – whether it be political correctness, ethnic particularism or the commercialization of lifestyles – is the multi-different subject that wants to be recognized within the context of the existing order, that holds fast to its particularity, maintaining and essentializing it, and thereby erases the possibility of the political act, for example the lesbian, Afro-American mother in a wheelchair, who lives on welfare. At the conference on communism at Frankfurt University,

Slavoj Žižek enriched the debate around a conceivable future scenario by positing the case of a community that considers offering corpses to the necrophile members of its community to eat, rather than burying them.9 On what premises is this reasoning founded? Which concept of singularity does it employ?

On the one hand, Žižek and Badiou are right in stating that capital, as a deterritorializing movement and a process of self-valorizing value, contributes to the way that modes of subjectivation are further commodified and converted into lifestyles driven by consumption and commerce. For them, the abstract homogeneity of capital and the concrete particularity of culturalized or ethnicized identities are therefore two sides of the same coin: the latter – the particular-identitarian – supplements the former – capital. On the other, although its political motto is productive – to quote Badiou: "Neither monetary homogeneity nor identitarian protest; neither the abstract universality of capital nor the particularity of interest proper to a subset;"10 – a theoretical reductionism in the conceptualization of difference and a neglect of governmental strategies in the analysis of society is evident. Universality and singularity are only discussed in reciprocal relationship with capital, whose progress requires the non-equivalence of the identitarian. The production of bodily norms together with their deviations, the regulation and politicization of life, which Foucault has described in *Discipline and Punish* and in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, are not analysed. And this very issue of the body and the norm was also at the origin of minoritarian politics; rather than a blithe acknowledgement and an identitarian confirmation of them, minoritarian politics demanded the breaking down of embedded norms within and by means of the bodies themselves.

Featuring an inexhaustible stock of examples such as "black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, paedophile Catholics, moderate

Muslims, married priests" and, furthermore, the "[...] inexhaustible potential for mercantile investments in this upsurge – taking the form of communities demanding recognition and so called cultural singularities – of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs"11, the polemic launched by Žižek and Badiou against minoritarian politics shows how they too overrate the unleashed dynamic of capital, while playing down the neo-conservative reinforcement of family and religious values in their theories. In the case of Žižek and Badiou, one may assume that this overaccentuation is case-related and therefore linked to the discussion of minority, and that there are two reasons for it. One is a left-wing conservatism and the loathing of commodification and difference that is associated with it; the other is the restriction of their analysis of universality and singularity to the relationship to the above-mentioned abstraction of exchange, which is due to Marxist theory. Also, when they show both developments – deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and their mutual stabilization – on the one hand an increasing commodification of differences, on the other an increasing neo-conservative terror of difference (Badiou analyses it in the first chapter of the book on St Paul12), the original conception of minoritarian difference remains unspecified: "There will be the [...] demands, either for the genetic right to have such and such a form of specialized sexual behaviour recognized as a minoritarian identity; or for the return, pure and simple, to archaic, culturally established conceptions, such as that of strict conjugality, the confinement of women, and so forth. It is perfectly possible to combine the two, as becomes apparent when homosexual protest concerns the right to be reincluded in the grand traditionalism of marriage and the family, or to take responsibility for the defrocking of a priest with the Pope's blessing."13 What is missed out here is something that found militant expression in Italy and France in the 1970s and was a radical alternative to Badiou's own Maoist attitude.

It is the combination of different positions in the sense of an anti-capitalist and anti-normative politics, in which difference is always conceived of as difference open to differentiation and as becoming, never as norm or identity. In contrast, Badiou in his *St Paul* operates with the confrontation of a false and a true alternative, either the communitarism of the group or universal singularity.

Let us look briefly now at some arguments in Badiou's book on St Paul, which he wrote in 1997, twenty years after Foucault had published his objectives for a minoritarian politics in the introduction to the American edition of *Anti-Oedipus*. For Badiou, political emancipation can only be articulated universally. The one, the universal, is held ready for all, without exception; it registers no differences whatsoever in the subjects.14 This is what is remarkable about the concept of the universal that Paul expresses in his letter to the Galatians: "„There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3.28)!"15 Furthermore, Paul is for Badiou the figure of a militant in whom the connection between the idea of revolution and its subjective materialization comes to light. In other words, he is a predecessor of Lenin. As Lenin had insisted on the immediate possibility of a revolution in Russia in his April Theses against the evolutionary conception of time of the Second International, so Paul testifies to the sudden coincidental nature of an event, which appears without cause and only becomes capable of being real and true at the moment when a subject professes total faith in it: in this case, the event is the resurrection of Jesus. And at this precise moment, the subject transgresses itself in the same way that the event transcends the conditions from which it emerged. Thus, for Badiou, the political event, the possibility of revolution, draws no support from the particular; it is mercilessly subtracted from any societal historicity and any difference. With this combination of

absolute universalization and simultaneous subjectivation of the event, Badiou's position differs from a whole range of other post-Marxist positions on the event, which are concerned with the universalization of the particular and with the whatever. Laclau's reflections would be a case in point: the basic assumption underlying them is that an antagonistic particularity provisionally occupies the absent and empty universality of a given political community that is considered impossible by Laclau. Thus, the particular temporarily embodies the universality of fundamental change in a demand that transcends self-interest.16 In addition, Badiou's conception differs from Deleuze's idea of pre-individual singularity (a topic to which I will return), and from Agamben's idea of whatever singularity. In the collection of essays entitled *The Coming Community*, Agamben describes whatever singularity as uniqueness, attached not to the quality of a specific property nor to a generality without qualities, but rather to the thing with all its predicates, its being-such as such: it is whatever as much as it is lovable.17 What distinguishes Badiou's position is that, on the one hand, we encounter a subtractive ontology that speaks of a being without reference to its identity or attributes, in which there is no cause and no substance. The infinite multiplicity of being does not belong to itself, rather it goes beyond itself; and it is the contingency of an event that allows such a self-transcending multiplicity to emerge. On the other hand, the event materializes in a subject that testifies to it. Thus, Badiou stabilizes his subtractive ontology by returning to a subject that is alone and heroic, that is faithful and loves. In this way, his political thinking results in the production of a militant subjectivity, which follows roughly the following ethical maxims: "Decide on what cannot be decided upon by remaining faithful to a contingent event." This idea of the political seems to me to be under threat from two elements: from the religiosity and heroic isolation of an absolutely

transgressive militant subjectivation, and by the immediate universalization of difference, which in the current order is nothing but false separateness, exclusion and demarcation.

However, Deleuze and Guattari have broken with the significance of political subjectivity and reinforce a conceptualization of differences, conceived as forces that are not attributable to any subject or object and that break down identitarian attachments. These forces are pre-individual; they constitute things and subjects; they form an assemblage of singular points, from which the event can potentially emerge. For them, therefore, the issue of the political is how differences become interlinked and in what dimensionality (molar, molecular). The intensities in the pure functioning of this assemblage are always more individual and more specific than a subject. Deleuze and Guattari have tried to describe this as the impersonal affectivity of a pre-individual sensuality, an idea they have developed by referring back to Duns Scotus' medieval notion of 'thisness' or haecceity.[18] A 'thisness' is a mode of individuation that is more individual than a subject or a thing. To become minor means to open up to this non-subjective 'thisness', whereby the power of the non-countable is set against the countable. In contrast to Badiou, Deleuze and Guattari set out from the assumption that this process of becoming non-countable, of becoming minor, which conflicts with representation and reintegration, occurs in concrete struggles and with concrete, particular demands.[19] These differences do not find universal form in One (*einem Einen*), but within a reciprocal relationship between an anti-normative and anti-capitalist politics, in which the differences do not disappear, but become arbitrary.[20]

In a Spinozian tradition, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize the pre-individual forces of desire as the speed and slowness of affects. Each individuality is a relationship of affective velocities. In

Spinoza. Practical Philosophy, Deleuze writes: "You will define an animal, or a human being, not by its form, its organs, and its function, and not as a subject either; you will define it by the affects of which it is capable. Affective capacity, with a maximum threshold and a minimum threshold, is a constant notion in Spinoza."21 In this strictly superficial and exterior understanding of being as topology, being is a type of ecological environment for the development of differences, which in the Spinozian sense can be understood as forces to effect (*Wirk-Kräfte*) and as potentiality. The problem and the tension in Deleuze's political thinking appear in the manner in which relationships of forces acquire the sort of dimensionality that allows them to effect a long-term break with the valorizing practices of capitalism and the regulatory institutional procedures of societies, to intervene in them, change them and work against their own transformation into system-stabilizing elements. When we turn to Deleuze's political texts of the late 1970s and the 1980s, this issue remains lyrically vague and politically diffuse. Quoting from another text about minoritarian politics from 1977 in the essay "Dialogues", written with Claire Parnet, the issue is invoked in such terms as the following: "It is then from *the North to the South* that a destabilization occurs [...] and that a stream hollows out a channel, even a fairly deep one, which puts everything at stake again and upsets the plane of organisation. A Corsica here, elsewhere a Palestine, a highjacked airplane, a tribal push, a feminist movement, a protest from ecologists, a Russian dissident – there will always be some insurgence in the south."22

After the experience of the failure of minoritarian politics, by which a large proportion of the dissident field of 1968 entered into the hegemonic and stabilized it, or dissolved into reactionary forms, the point is not to abandon the strategy of the minoritarian;

it is a question rather of debating its dangers, some of which I have identified in this paper and of posing anew the question of organizing, something that has been neglected with the rejection of the party form in radical left movements, important though this rejection may be. After the break with the party, organizations ought to be seen not as organs of leadership and mediation or in the confrontation between spontaneity and the directive, between mass and leadership. It should be the other way round: the forces of cooperation should be acknowledged in organization, which bring clashes and conflict with them as much as relief from the burden of constant self-mobilization and the distance between the political act and the self. On a theoretical level, my question is this: how can the event of the political be conceptualized so that a minoritarian concatenation could expand in an emancipatory manner? How could this be possible without first of all reducing the event to the mediation of resistance; secondly, without assigning anthropological foundations such as the force of living labour or sensual humanity to the political itself; and thirdly, without embedding it in the decisive force of a collective or a sole subject, in the power of a coming Paul-Lenin who, as Žižek would like to teach us, would ensure that the political did not dissolve into the irresponsibility of impossible demands. For Lenin is the master who doesn't hesitate to act, who has relinquished for ever the childish privilege of drawing back, claiming *I didn't mean it.*[23] Though we might need the historical companionship, we will not call forth the ghosts of Necajev's terrorist, Lenin's cadre or Trotsky's soldiers.

1 Michel Foucault, *Power, Essential Works 1954-84*, Volume III, edited by James D. Faubion, translated by Robert Hurley and others, London/ New York: The Penguin Press 2000, p. 109.

2 Cf the rough explanatory notes on the primacy of desire in: Gilles Deleuze, *Desire and Pleasure, in: Gilles Delleuze: Two Regimes of Madness, Texts and interviews 1975-1995,* edited by David Lapoujade, translated by Ames hodges and Mike Taormina, New York/Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2006, pp 122-135.

3 A complex examination of Blanqui can be found in Frank Deppe, *Verschwörung, Aufstand und Revolution. Blanqui und das Problem der sozialen Revolution*, Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt 1970.

4 For a dense and critical examination of the violent practices of the Marxist Left, its personal analysis of power as bourgeois domination and the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, cf. Etienne Balibar's article "Gewalt" in the *Historisch-Kritischen Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, ed. by Wolfgang-Fritz Haug Vol. 5, Berlin, Hamburg: Argument 2001.

5 Cf Rancière's remarks on Schiller's aesthetic thinking and the double legacy of the avant-garde – politico-strategic leadership on the one hand and a sensual union of politics and life on the other – in: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London: Continuum 2004; Jacques Rancière, „Von der Aktualität des Kommunismus zu seiner Inaktualität", in: DemoPunk et al. (Ed.), *Indeterminate Kommunismus*, Münster: Unrast 2005, p. 28ff.

6 Jacques Rancière 2006, p. 45.

7 Étienne Balibar, “Three concepts of politics: Emancipation, Transformation, Civility”, in: *Politics and the Other Scene*,.London and New York: Verso, 2002, pp. 1-39.

8 Cf ibid.

9 In 2003 a conference on the actuality of communism was held at the University of Frankfurt under the title "Indeterminate! Communism". It was organised by DemoPunk (Frankfurt) and Kritik & Praxis (Berlin).

10 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 13.

11 Ibid., p. 10.

12 Cf ibid., pp. 12-14.

13 Ibid., p. 13.

14 Cf ibid., p. 76.

15 Ibid, p. 9.

16 Cf for example Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso, 1996.

17 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, pp.1-2.

18 Cf on the concept of haecceity, for example, Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia. London: Athalone Press 1988, pp. 232-310; and on the concept of minority, cf the corresponding section on minority in the same book, pp. 291-293.

19 Ibid., p.291-293.

20 Ibid.

21 Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza. Practical Philosophy*, San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988, p. 123-124.

22 Gilles Deleuze/ Claire Parnet, Politics, in: Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *On the Line*, New York: Semiotexte 1983, p. 83.

23 Slavoj Žižek, *Die Tücke des Subjekts*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2001, pp. 329-333. [Title in English*: The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London and New York: Verso 1999].