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Post-Emancipatory Concept of Emancipation

Negri's Multitude as Post-Emancipatory Concept of Emancipation

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We all know this situation: You have just taken to the streets to protest against an unnecessary war, and already you hear speakers on the podium calling for a fight against the Jewish world conspiracy, with a response of euphoric acclamation from the neo-Nazis demonstrating there, too. Or you exert yourself on behalf of a people that has been persecuted, oppressed and forced to flee for decades, and you automatically find yourself in the same camp along with religious fundamentalists, who treat their women worse than their enemies. Experiences like this are not rare. On the contrary, they have become a rule that inevitably accompanies our political engagement today. The result of this is that we can no longer completely identify with this engagement. We are still engaged, we still raise our voices where we find it appropriate or just, we articulate our protests and our solidarity, but somehow we only do it half-heartedly. We do it with an irritating feeling of discomfort, that we can never seem to get rid of. Why is that?

First of all, we have obviously become incapable of clearly and distinctly articulating our emancipatory interest - entirely in the sense of Descartes' *clarus et distinctus*: for him, the only insight that was clear, was the one that could be clearly distinguished and separated from all other insights. That is exactly what we can no longer do - clearly distinguish our emancipatory interest from other interests and distinctly separate ourselves from the political positions and opinions that we do not share.

Naturally, one could say that this has always been the case. Did not the members of the Red Army that liberated Europe from Nazism also bring Stalinist totalitarianism with them? And the successes of liberal democracy on the other side, has it not been accompanied by merciless (neo-) colonialist oppression?

Yet there is a difference. We no longer live in an age of emancipation. At least, this is Ernesto Laclau's thesis. The grand narratives of global emancipation that have essentially characterized our political life for centuries, are now dissolving entirely before our eyes. This disappearance of emancipation from the political horizon of our era coincides with the end of the Cold War, according to Laclau, which he also regards as the final manifestation of the Enlightenment, at least in the ideologies of its two protagonists.

How should we understand this diagnosis? And what does it mean to reflect on politics and act politically "beyond emancipation"[1]?

Laclau principally distinguishes between two dimensions of emancipation, which are implicit in the traditional concept of emancipation: one *radical* and the other *non-radical*. If emancipation is radical, then it must be grounded in itself and exclude that which hinders its completion as a radical otherness. In

this case, the moment of emancipation negates an order - let's call it "repressive" - that is fundamentally alien to it. However, if emancipation is non-radical, then it has a deeper ground in common with its Other, which links the old, pre-emancipatory order and the "emancipated" order. An emancipation results here at the level of the ground of society, and it influences all spheres of society. The emancipation inspired by Marxism is also characterized by these two dimensions. The class struggle between the proletariat and the capitalist class must be taken as a radical form of political antagonism, which can only be resolved in a total negation of one of its two sides - in the famous dictatorship of the proletariat. However, these two antagonistic sides have a common ground, which lies in the material production of societal life, namely in the fundamental antagonism between social productive forces and production circumstances. This ground simultaneously closes the rift torn open between its two dimensions by emancipation.

What is crucial - and this is also Laclau's key argument - is that a closure of this separation immanent to emancipation, is no longer possible today. An emancipatory act can no longer resolve its logical contradiction, completely reject one of its incompatible sides - either the dichotomous or the holistic one. For Laclau, an intrinsic indistinguishability between them has become the *conditio sine qua non* of every discourse of emancipation. The rift between the two dimensions of emancipation, caused by the emancipatory act, remains open, just as society remains completely opaque to itself. The fact that a society is no longer transparent to itself means nothing other than that the ground of this society can no longer be imagined. In this way, the universal also disappears from the historical terrain, in which the struggle for concrete

emancipatory projects takes place. Struggles like this dissolve into mere particularism.[2]

Today, instead of *the* emancipation, we can only speak of a plurality of emancipations. The fact that we can no longer clearly distinguish and separate them from one another, is due specifically to their fundamental opacity. In fact, we can no longer find any unified ground, to which all emancipatory struggles could be reduced. Without this grounding - without the ground of society being postulated - there is no exclusion, no outside anymore. The societies in which we live, can no longer be imagined as radically separable, and we can draw no clear line of division, through which our emancipatory interest excludes something in society that should be excluded. Nor can we identify with a subject that universally represents the ground of society. This is the reason for the discomfort that constantly accompanies our current emancipatory engagement.

The death of the ground, the universal, the subject, grand narratives, etc. is almost automatically equated with the appearance of post-modernism. I think, though, that we could also date it earlier, at least as far as the grand narrative of Marxist-inspired emancipation is concerned: specifically with the worst historical trauma that shook the socialist and communist workers' movement - the rise of fascism and its political victory in Italy and Germany. Politically, the proletariat has never recovered from this shock. The tragedy was not only that the working class refused to take over the key role in its own emancipation, but also that it even defected to its class enemy. Instead of emancipating itself, the working class was suddenly willing to oppress itself.

As reaction to this defeat - to the collapse of the entire construction of proletarian emancipation - it seems to me that a fundamental distinction needs to be made between two lines.

One of the first, which we can call strategically political, took place in 1935 in the famous speech by Georgi Dimitrov at the 7th World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow[3]: the inauguration of the so-called policy of the People's Front. This represents an attempt at a fundamental correction of the policy of the radical class struggle, which had already been called into question in the face of the fascist challenge. The project of the emancipation of the working class thus distances itself from the dictatorship of the proletariat and aims for the broadest possible unity of democratic forces that are prepared to resist fascism. Dimitrov counted the most diverse classes of people and social groups among the possible members of an alliance like this, including youth, women, farmers, Blacks (in the USA), manual laborers, (Catholic, anarchist and unorganized) workers, "the entire working population", social democrats and independent socialists, churches, intelligentsia, certain sections of the petty bourgeoisie, "oppressed nations of the colonies and semi-colonies", national liberation movements, but also those he calls "democratic capitalists". In Dimitrov's view they were opposed by a kind of fascist alliance: the rich, capitalists, landowners, reactionaries of all kinds, banks and corporations, the power of finance capital and fascist dictatorship in general.

The second reaction to the Nazi-Fascist threat is of a more theoretical nature: as is well known, the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research has focused its analysis of domination on the psycho-social structures of authority since 1936.[4] The motivation is again the failure, the reluctance of the proletariat to fulfill its historical role and the mystery of its open enthusiasm for Nazism.

The *Studies on Authority and Family* are the result. Authority, as analyzed by the theoreticians of the Frankfurter School, is no longer the old authority of the patriarchal family, which characterized the patrimonial capitalism of the 19th century, though, but rather the authority of anonymous social institutions, the authority of the old fordist modes of production, capitalist rationality, so-called instrumental reason or the violence of the authoritarian state organizing and protecting it (whether in the form of the industrial cartel in Nazi Germany, the five-year plan in the USSR, or the New Deal Economy all the way to the Keynesian welfare state). In its later phases, this analysis developed into a critique of the cultural industry and a critique of the so-called authoritarian personality. A practical-political culmination of this critique of modern authority took place in the protest movements of the sixties. Anti-authoritarianism is the common denominator of these protests.

If we attempt to understand these two reactions to the Nazi-Fascist challenge against the background of the concept of emancipation in Laclau's analysis, the following picture results: Fascist pressure once again rips open the same rift between the two dimensions in the already closed totality of proletarian emancipation. Whereas the People's Front uncovers the dichotomous dimension of emancipation, the critique of authority animates the holistic dimension of its ground.

What Dimitrov specifically invokes with his anti-fascist strategy is nothing other than a new split in society, which runs along the postulated fundamental antagonism between the proletarian and the capitalist class. In a sense, he dissolves the ground of society - expressed in its class character - in a new political antagonism between the democratic people and its fascist Other. This new separation then results as a radical exclusion, which implies no

common ground between the two opposing parts of society. The (anti-fascist) people, however, is certainly capable of giving itself a radical foundation[5] in the battle against its fascist Other, specifically as the subject of its own emancipation and carrier of sovereignty. In this respect, the people emancipating itself is also capable of forming a political community, specifically a state, and hypostasizing itself as the ultimate authority of this state. In addition, Dimitrov's strategy of the policy of the People's Front - which we could regard as a kind of democratic radicalization[6] of the proletarian project of emancipation - prepared a revolutionary-democratic legitimacy for the future people's republics, which were the primary model for the political order of real-socialist states until their collapse in 1989.[7] The anti-colonialist liberation movements also pursued this same dichotomous logic; as Frantz Fanon expressed it explicitly in *The Wretched of the Earth*, their ultimate goal was to establish the authority of the fighting people.

Anti-authoritarianism - from the *Studies on Authority and Family* to the New Social Movements - is actually based on the other dimension of emancipation, that of the ground. The dialectical antagonism between free subjectivity and authoritarian domination that oppresses it lies in the structure of modern rationality. For this reason, the emancipation can never be radical. "The Great Refusal" takes place everywhere, in the family and in the factory, in the university and on the street, against the culture industry and against mainstream media, but it can never be traced back to a fundamental political antagonism. Even at its historical apex, which Marcuse described as an outbreak of mass surrealism immediately after 1968 in *An Essay on Liberation*, in its main form, the battle against authority remains a kind of - at most, mass - cultural subversion.

Hardt and Negri's multitude concept comes from the same theoretical and historical source. It is a new incarnation of the old autonomistic strategy, the goal of which was liberation from the existing structures of authority. In his attempt to re-theoretize this strategy during his imprisonment in Italy, Negri came across Spinoza's distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*. According to Spinoza, the power of God (*potentia* in the sense of a creative force, creative activity) is his essence. *Potestas*, however, is that which seems to be in his power (authority, power of command, sovereignty). For Negri, *potentia* is the productive essence of multitude, and it is superior to sovereignty, authority. Agamben, who commented on this thesis by Negri[8], translates it to the difference between the constituting force and sovereign power. He notes, though, that Negri does not find a criterion anywhere for distinguishing the two concepts from one another.

Nevertheless, Negri insists on the conceptual distinction between constituting and constituted force. Multitude can never be reduced to a form of authority or constituted order. It may be regarded as a heterogeneous mass, but not in the sense of the heterogeneous masses of the anti-fascist policy of the People's Front. The multitude can never become a people, a demos. It can never form a political community, but can only subvert it.

That is why we have no feeling of political belonging within the multitude and can develop no sense of binding solidarity with the other "members". We are in the process of doing so, but in a completely untransparent and uncanny way. For this reason, our emancipatory engagement in this process remains being only opaquely present.

The irruption of fascism and its initial political victory in the 1930's have fatefully sundered the once unified grand narrative of

proletarian emancipation. On the side of its political representation, where it founded political communities and new orders, such as that of real existing socialism, it became increasingly older, uglier and weaker, despite its political victories, until it finally passed away. On the other side, that of anti-authoritarian subversion, it succeeded in surviving not only its political defeats, but also the death of the subject and of the ground. Here, in the constantly exploding sphere of culture, from which it can no longer be distinguished today, emancipation has remained strong, beautiful and forever young. It only rarely casts an eye back at its old political portrait; even more rarely than Dorian Gray did with his famous portrait.

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[1]Cf. Ernesto Laclau, "Jenseits von Emanzipation", in: Ernesto Laclau, Emanzipation und Differenz, Wien: Turia und Kant, 2002, 23-44. ("Beyond Emancipation")

[2]ibid., 37

[3]Georgi Dimitrov, "The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International", in *The United Front: The Struggle against Fascism and War*, New York: International, 1938, 9-93.

[4]My comments here are based on a lecture by Brian Holmes, "The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique", held at the symposium *Cultural Touch*, Vienna, June 2001.

[5]Dimitrov postulates the essence of the people in its heterogeneity. The fascists, on the other hand, saw the essence of a

people in its unity. This is why what was fascist had to excluded from the people, because it negated the people's authentic heterogeneity.

[6]If not to say: *radical democratization*, thus alluding to Laclau/ Mouffe's concept of radical democracy.

[7]Thus the second Yugoslavia emerged in 1943 as an immediate realization of the policy of the people's front in the battle against fascism. The only reason for the unification of ex-Yugoslavian nations under the protection of a common state listed by the authors of the AVNOJ resolutions (the founding document of the Yugoslavian Federation) was the joint battle against fascism, while they named no cultural, historical, linguistic, in short identitary proximity or affinity among these nations. In this respect, the second Yugoslavia (1943-1991) was also a purely emancipatory community.

[8]Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Die souveräne Macht und das nackte Leben, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002, 54. (English: Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Meridian 1998)