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Destruction, Negation, Subtraction

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ABSTRACT: Pasolini was simultaneously a revolutionary Marxist and a man forever influenced by his religious childhood. So his question was: do the revolutionary becoming of history and political negativity represent a destruction of the tragic beauty of the Greek myths and of the peaceful promise of Christianity? Or do we have to speak of a subtraction where an affirmative reconciliation of beauty and peace becomes possible in a new egalitarian world?

DESTRUCTION, NEGATION, SUBTRACTION

Alain Badiou

The abstract content of my lecture is very simple. I can summarize it in five points:

1. All creations, all novelties, are in some sense the affirmative part of a negation. ‘Negation’, because if something happens as new, it cannot be reduced to the objectivity of the situation where it happens. So, it is certainly something like a negative exception to the regular laws of this objectivity. But ‘affirmation’, the affirmative part of the negation, because if a creation is reducible to a negation of the common laws of objectivity, it completely depends on them with respect to its identity. So the very essence of a novelty implies negation but must affirm its identity regardless of the negativity of negation. That is why I say that a creation or a novelty must be defined paradoxically as the affirmative part of a negation.

2. I name ‘destruction’ the negative part of negation. For example, if we consider Schoenberg’s creation, at the beginning of the previous century, of the dodecaphonic musical system, we can say that this creation achieves the destruction of the tonal system, which had dominated musical creation in the Western world for three centuries. Similarly, the Marxist idea of revolution is one of achieving the process of immanent negation of capitalism through the complete destruction of the machinery of the bourgeois State. In both cases, negation is the eventual concentration of a process through which is achieved the complete disintegration of an old world. It is this eventual concentration which realizes the negative power of negation, the negativity of negation. And I name it destruction.

3. I name ‘subtraction’ the affirmative part of negation. For example, the new musical axioms which structure the admissible succession of notes in a musical work, for Schoenberg, outside the tonal system, are in no way deducible from the destruction of this system. They are the affirmative laws of a new framework for musical activity. They show the possibility of a new coherence for musical discourse. The point that we must understand is that this new coherence is new not

because it completes the process of disintegration of the system. The new coherence is new to the extent that, in the framework that Schoenberg's axioms impose, musical discourse avoids the laws of tonality or, more precisely, becomes indifferent to these laws. That is why we can say that musical discourse is subtracted from its tonal legislation. Clearly, this subtraction is within the horizon of negation, but it exists independently of the purely negative part of negation. It exists apart from destruction.

It is the same thing for Marx in the political context. Marx insists on saying that the destruction of the bourgeois State is not in itself an achievement. The goal is communism, that is, the end of the State as such, and the end of social classes, in favour of a purely egalitarian organization of civil society. But to come to this, we must first substitute for the bourgeois State a new State, which is not the immediate result of the destruction of the first. In fact, it is a State as different from the bourgeois State as the experimental music of today can be from an academic tonal piece of the nineteenth century, or a contemporary performance can be from an academic representation of the Olympic gods. For the new State – which Marx names 'dictatorship of the proletariat' – is a State that organizes its own vanishing. A State which is, in its very essence, the process of the non-State. Perhaps as for Adorno 'informal music' is the process, within a work, of the disintegration of all forms, so we can say that in the original thought of Marx, 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was a name for a State that is subtracted from all the classical laws of a 'normal' State. For a classical State is a form of power, but the State named the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is the power of un-power, the power of the disappearance of the question of power.

In any case, we name subtraction this part of negation that is oriented by the possibility of something which exists absolutely, apart from that which exists under the laws of what negation negates.

4. So negation is always, in its concrete action – political or artistic – suspended between destruction and subtraction. That the very essence of negation is destruction has been the fundamental idea of the previous century. The fundamental idea of the century that is beginning must be that the very essence of negation is subtraction.

5. But subtraction is not the negation of destruction, no more than destruction was the negation of subtraction, as we have seen with Schoenberg or Marx. The most difficult question is precisely that of

maintaining the complete concept of negation from the point of view of subtraction – as Lenin, Schoenberg, or Marcel Duchamp, or Cage, or Mao Zedong, or Jackson Pollock maintained the complete concept of negation from the point of view of destruction.

To clarify the very complex interplay between destruction, negation, and subtraction, I propose to read with you a fragment of a magnificent poem by Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Pasolini is well known as a filmmaker; in particular, during the sixties and the seventies, he directed profound contemporary visual readings of the two great Western intellectual traditions: the ancient Greeks, with movies like *Medea* and *Oedipus*, and Judeo-Christianity with *The Gospel according to Matthew* and a very complex script about the life of Saint Paul. All of that constitutes a difficult enterprise of thinking about the relationship among history, myths and religion. Pasolini was simultaneously a revolutionary Marxist and a man forever influenced by his religious childhood. So his question was: do the revolutionary becoming of history and political negativity represent a destruction of the tragic beauty of the Greek myths and of the peaceful promise of Christianity? Or do we have to speak of a subtraction where an affirmative reconciliation of beauty and peace becomes possible in a new egalitarian world?

Pasolini is also well known for the relationship between his private life and his public convictions. Not only he was gay, but this was a part of his political vision, many years before the beginning of the gay and lesbian movement. He perfectly knew that desire – and in his own case, desire for young poor workers of the suburbs of Rom – is not independent of our ideological choices. Once more, the question is one of inscribing sexual desire in political negativity not as a purely subversive and destructive feature, but as a creative displacement of the line that separates the individual subjectivity from the collective one.

Pasolini was murdered in November 1975. He was fifty-three years old. The circumstances of this horrible murder are still obscure today. But certainly they are located exactly at the point where political determinations are linked with sexual situations. It is this point which was for Pasolini a constant source of new truths, but also an existential tragedy.

Marvellous movies, political commitments, critical essays, great novels, a new existential style ... beyond all that, Pasolini is the greatest poet of his generation. His work can be mapped out as belonging to

three different stylistic eras. We can distinguish three major political collections.

1. The poems written when Pasolini was twenty years old, in a specific Italian dialect, Friulan. Here we have the attempt to subtract poetry from the authority of official Italian language and to use a popular language against the State language. It is a characteristic example of what Deleuze names 'minoritarian politics' in poetry.

2. The significant collection published in 1957, the heart of which is the magnificent poem, 'The Ashes of Gramsci', a complex meditation concerning history, Marxist ideology, the Italian landscape and personal feelings. ... The title is in itself a metaphor of melancholic negation. It is as though Gramsci, the Master, the Father of Italian Marxism, were here dissipated in History's dust.

3. The two collections of the beginning of the sixties: *The Religion of My Time* (1961) and *Poetry in the Form of a Rose* (1964). We have here the context of the fragment I shall explain today. Fundamentally, it is the bitter disappointment of Pasolini concerning the practices of the Italian Left and, more precisely, two very serious failures of the Communist Party.

First, its infidelity to the armed struggle of thousands of young men against fascism and Nazism during the war. Second, its inability to organize the revolt of thousands of young workers in the suburbs of Italian towns.

So we have here a double negation of the young people. In the past, where their fighting was forgotten; in the present, where their revolt is despised.

But Pasolini has two very important reasons for being passionately interested in the existence and the struggles of young people. First, his younger brother, Guido, was killed during the war while fighting as a partisan, a resistance fighter. And the terrible problem is that he was killed not by fascists, but by communists from another country, Yugoslav communists, because of the rivalry between Italians and Yugoslavs concerning control of some border regions. Second, as a gay man, Pasolini always had a real and constant relationship with very poor young workers, or with the unemployed of the suburbs. That is why many poems by Pasolini speak of the contradiction between history, politics and the concrete existence of proletarian youth.

We shall first listen to one of these poems. It is a fragment of a very long poem, 'Vittoria' ('Victory'). Let us hear the original Italian version.

‘Ogni politica è una realpolitica’, anima

guerriera, con la tua delicata rabbia!
Non riconosci un'altra anima, eh? Questa
dove c'è tutta la prosa dell'uomo abile,

del rivoluzionario attaccato all'onesta
media dell'uomo (anche la complicità
con gli assassinii degli Anni Amari s'innesta

nel classicismo protettore, che fa
il comunista perbene); non riconosci il cuore
che diventa schiavo del suo nemico, e va

dove il nemico va, condotto dalla storia
ch'è storia di tutti due, e li fa, nel profondo,
stranamente fratelli; non riconosci i timori

d'una coscienza che, lottando col mondo,
ne condivide le norme della lotta nei secoli,
come per un pessimismo in cui affondano,

per farsi più virili, le speranze. Lieto
d'una lietezza che non sa retroscena
è questo esercito - cieco nel cieco

sole - di giovani morti, che viene
ed aspetta. Se il suo padre, il suo capo,
lo lascia solo nei bianchi monti, nelle serene

pianure - assorbito in un misterioso dibattito
con il Potere, legato alla sua dialettica
che la storia rinnova senza pace –

piano piano dentro i barbarici petti
dei figli, l'odio si fa amore per l'odio,
ardendo solo in essi, i pochi, i benedetti.

Ah, Disperazione che non conosci codici!
Ah, Anarchia, libero amore
di Santità, con i tuoi canti prodi!¹

To have an overview of this fragment we can say something like the following: Everybody is saying that politics must be realistic, that all ideological illusions have been proved dangerous and bloody.

But what is the real for politics? The real is History. The real is the concrete becoming of struggle and negation. But how is it possible to understand or know History? We can do that if we know the rules of History, the great laws of becoming. This is the lesson of Marxism.

But are the laws of History not the same for us and for our enemies? And if that is the case, how can negation be distinguished from approval?

We are in a situation where destruction, having been suppressed – subtraction itself, the opposition, if you want – becomes complicity. As Pasolini writes: we recognize that we are going exactly where the enemy goes, ‘led by a History that is the history of both’. And political hope is impossible.

So, if the young dead of the last war could see the present political situation they would not agree with this complicity. Moreover, they could not accept their political fathers, the leaders of Communist Party. And they would become, by necessity, barbarian and nihilistic people, exactly like the young unemployed of the suburbs.

The poem is a manifesto for true negation.

If subtraction is separated from destruction, we have as a result Hate and Despair. The symbol of this result is the fusion of the dead heroes of the last war with the despised workers of our suburbs in a sort of terrorist figure.

But if destruction is separated from subtraction, we have as result the impossibility of politics, because young people are absorbed in a sort of nihilistic collective suicide, which is without thinking and destination.

In the first case, fathers, who are responsible for the emancipatory political orientation, abandon their sons in the name of the real. In the second case, sons, who are the collective strength of a possible revolt, abandon their fathers in the name of Despair.

But emancipatory politics is possible only when some fathers and mothers and some sons and daughters are allied in an effective negation of the world as it is.

With all that in mind, we can now read the poem in English:

‘All politics is Realpolitik’, warring

soul, with your delicate anger!
You do not recognize a soul other than this one
which has all the prose of the clever man,

of the revolutionary devoted to the honest
common man (even the complicity
with the assassins of the Bitter Years grafted

onto protector classicism, which makes
the communist respectable): you do not recognize the heart
that becomes slave to its enemy, and goes

where the enemy goes, led by a history
that is the history of both, and makes them, deep down,
perversely, brothers; you do not recognize the fears

of a consciousness that, by struggling with the world,
shares the rules of the struggle over the centuries,
as through a pessimism into which hopes

drown to become more virile. Joyous
with a joy that knows no hidden agenda,
this army – blind in the blind

sunlight – of dead young men comes
and waits. If their father, their leader, absorbed
in a mysterious debate with Power and bound

by its dialectics, which history renews ceaselessly –
if he abandons them,
in the white mountains, on the serene plains,

little by little in the barbaric breasts
of the sons, hate becomes love of hate,
burning only in them, the few, the chosen.

Ah, Desperation that knows no laws!
Ah, Anarchy, free love
of Holiness, with your valiant songs!²

Some remarks:

1. The whole beginning: with the idea of *Realpolitik* we have something like a negation without destruction. I define this ‘opposition’, in the ordinary democratic sense. Like the Democrats against Bush. We find two excellent definitions of this sort of negation: ‘the prose of the clever man’ and ‘protector classicism’. You will note that, in both cases, the comparison is with a conservative artistic style.

2. The ‘bitter years’ are the years of the war, which, in Italy, was also largely a civil war.

3. The heart of ‘opposition’ is to substitute some rules for the violence of the real. In my jargon, I can say: to substitute rules of history, or rules of economy, to the rupture of the Event. And when you do that, you ‘share the rules of the struggle’ with your enemy. And finally you become a ‘slave of your enemy’, a ‘brother’ of your enemy.

So opposition is in fact the death of negation. And it is the death of political hope.

4. In this context, Pasolini has a sort of magnificent and melancholic vision. The army of dead young men of the last war – and among them certainly his younger brother Guido – are coming to see their father, their leader. That is, in fact, the revolutionary leadership of today. This army, ‘blind in the blind sunlight’, comes and waits “in the white mountains, on the serene plains”. And they see their father, their leader, absorbed in the very weak form of negation, the dialectical negation. This negation is not separate from power. This negation is only an obscure relationship to power itself. It is ‘a mysterious debate with Power’. So the father is in fact without freedom; he is ‘bounded’ by the dialectics of power.

5. The conclusion is that this father ‘abandons them’. You see the problem, which is clearly a problem of today. The army of dead young men was on the side of destruction, of hate. They existed on the hard side of negation. But they wait for an orientation, for a negation which, under some paternal law, would reconcile destruction and subtraction.

But contemporary leaders abandon them. So they have only the destructive part of negation. They have only ‘desperation that knows no laws’!

6. And the description of their subjectivity is quite an expressive one. Yes, they were on the side of hate, of destruction. They were ‘angry young men’. But now – it is a very striking formula – ‘hate becomes love of hate’. This love of hate is negation as purely destructive.

Without access to subtraction, without fathers or leaders, we have to face the nudity of 'the barbaric breasts of the sons'.

7. Great poetry is always an anticipation, a vision, of the collective future. We can see here that Pasolini describes the terrorist subjectivity. He indicates with an astonishing precision that the possibility of this subjectivity among young men or women is the lack of any rational hope of changing the world. That is why he creates a poetical equivalence between Desperation (the nihilistic consequence of false negation), Anarchy (the purely destructive political version), and 'free love of Holiness', which is the religious context of terrorism, with the figure of the martyr. This equivalence is certainly clearer today than it was forty years ago, when Pasolini wrote 'Victory'.

We can now conclude: the political problems of the contemporary world can be solved neither in the weak context of democratic opposition, which in fact abandons millions of people to a nihilistic destiny, nor in the mystical context of destructive negation, which is another form of power, the power of death. Neither subtraction without destruction, nor destruction without subtraction.

This is, in fact, the problem of violence today. Violence is not, as was said during the previous century, the creative and revolutionary part of negation. The way of freedom is a subtractive one. But to protect the subtraction itself, to defend the new kingdom of emancipatory politics, we cannot radically exclude all forms of violence. The future is not on the side of the savage young men and women of working-class suburbs; we cannot abandon them to themselves. But the future is not on the side of the democratic wisdom of mothers' and fathers' law. We have to learn something of nihilistic subjectivity.

The world is made not of law and order, but of law and desire. Let us learn from Pasolini not to be 'absorbed in a mysterious debate with power', not to abandon millions of young men and women either 'in the white mountains' or 'on the serene plains'.

NOTES

- 1 Pasolini, 'Vittoria', in *Tutte le Poesie*, ed. by Walter Siti, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), I, p. 1265-66.
- 2 Pasolini, 'Victory', trans. by Norman MacAfee with Luciano Martinengo (2005), <http://direland.typepad.com/direland/2005/10/a_hitherto_unpu.html> [accessed 24 July 2012].

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