

POLITICAL
WILL AND
COLLECTIVE
CAPACITY



INTERVIEW
WITH PETER
HALLWARD

SEZGIN
BOYNIK

Peter Hallward is a writer and activist dedicated to dispersing any obscurantism existing in philosophy. He is against metaphysical thought of an absolute or autonomous principle, “one that is effectively self-grounding, self-causing, self-necessitating”.¹ Hallward’s aim is to pull philosophy down to this world.

His book on Gilles Deleuze is called *Out of This World*, critically studying how the reference to creativity is presented as something unbound to the existing world where we live, transcending all thought and mediations. To this rhizomatic understanding of transcendental theory, which some claim “has to remain completely provisional and completely open”, Hallward, in a roundtable discussion on Deleuzian politics, retorts:

Completely open and completely provisional – who has an interest in that? In my experience, if you talk to people who are engaged in labour struggles – for example trying to organise a group of immigrant workers in California – or to people who are fighting to strengthen the social movements in Haiti or Bolivia, what they constantly say is: ‘we are too weak and what we need is some form of continuity and strength, and our enemies are constantly trying to bust it up, to break it up, to fragment it, to divide us, to make it provisional, to reject any kind of consolidation of the instruments that we need to strengthen our hand.’²

By dispelling the pretentious aura of political philosophy, Hallward introduces the dynamics of people’s struggles, which are often more complicated than theoretical schemata, in order to understand the specificity of each situation. In opposition to the singularity of political thought, an idea that he criticises in his book *Absolutely Postcolonial* as “hierarchical in its essence”, Hallward introduces the specific, implying “a situation, a past, an intelligibility constrained by inherited conditions”.³ Hoping to prescribe a

philosophy that will be materialistic, historical, secular, and egalitarian, his idea searches to oppose the hybrid conceptualisation of postmodernism. This, Hallward thinks, is not only an intra-philosophical question but decisive for political struggles and strategies. His book *Damning the Flood*, about Haiti’s crisis since the declaration of independence, is the best example in showing the ways in which these hybrid politics are a multiplication of disjointed NGOs, evangelical churches, political parties, media outlets, and private security forces; an “exercise in division and disintegration”.⁴

The interview with Hallward took place in Helsinki in 2015, it is mainly addressing his research on the will of the people, or as he describes it, “dialectical voluntarism”.⁵ His project is to show that reactionary political statements and many theoretical writings have one thing in common: obfuscate, attack, silence, obviate, and render obsolete the will of the people. To varying degrees, Hallward finds this in the most outstanding representatives of contemporary philosophy (especially Žižek, Agamben, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Heidegger, and Nietzsche before them), thus making his intervention a difficult task. Historically, the will of the people was irreversibly declared with the French and Haitian revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, forcing for the first time an immediate and unconditional principle that inspired the whole radical enlightenment: affirmation of the natural, inalienable rights of all human beings. Since then, there has been a constant reaction against this radical demand.

In discussing the will of the people, we are trying to find out what kind of challenges this concept poses to philosophy, and how the political prescriptions of this position affect the understanding of organisation, class, nation, state, consciousness, and revolution. By discussing

the will of the people as a question of capacity, Hallward’s position, ultimately, is to draw practical conclusions from these philosophical abstractions.

1. Peter Hallward, “The One or the Other: French Philosophy Today”, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2003, p. 2.
2. Eric Alliez, Claire Colebrook, Peter Hallward, Nicholas Thoburn, Jeremy Gilbert, “Deleuzian Politics? A Roundtable Discussion”, *New Formations*, 68, 2010, p. 158.
3. Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific*, Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 5.
4. Peter Hallward, *Damning the Flood: Haiti and the Politics of Containment*, Verso, London, 2010, 56.
5. Peter Hallward, “The Will of the People: Notes Towards a Dialectical Voluntarism”, *Radical Philosophy* 155, May/June 2009.

Sezgin Boynik:

In your theoretical and political writings, you want to recover the concept of will; not only in philosophy but as well in politics. In Damming the Flood, a book on Haiti, you give many examples of how the will of the people is manipulated in conservative politics, but also you write about obfuscation of will in philosophy. I have an impression that you are attempting a formalisation of the will.

Peter Hallward:

First and foremost I take the will to be a matter of practice and action, of material capacity, the actual capacity an actor has or can acquire, to pursue this or that project or end. This is what makes the will, in the ordinary way that we use the word, something different from merely wanting or wishing for something; will is also different from mere whim, for the same reason. Of course the will takes different forms according to the sorts of actors, situations and capacities at issue. The will of one person is a different sort of will, with different sorts of capacities and limits, from the will of several people, which is again different from the will of a great many people. In each case, for it to be something like a *political* will it has to be organised, and the forms of organisation will vary with the situation, with the projects or goals it proposes, and also the obstacles that it faces.

One of the things that's become increasingly clear to me, as I've been working on this topic over the years, is that the concept and practice of the will is more intelligible, more coherent, and more

consequential when considered as a collective practice, rather than as an apparently individual or introspective one. Although typically treated as the 'private' or internal faculty par excellence, and often (especially in a tradition that stretches back to early Christian theologians) as the site of anguished inner torment and personal responsibility, I think the key questions to be asked of the will all become clearer when we treat it as a trans-individual or extra-individual faculty, one extended and generalised across different people (as a *volonté générale*, precisely), and so as the capacity of an organised collective actor.

I think then that the broader question is not really formal, or a matter of form, so much as a question of general capacity. The key questions are: whose capacity, in whose interests? As long as we live in a class-bound society, the privileged ruling class of that society will of course have every interest in maintaining its monopoly on political capacity, and on power in general. Threats to elite rule, obviously, take the form of mass empowerment, the risk that the many rather than the few might become genuine political actors. That question is at stake in places like Haiti, or in any unequal society, but it has been a political question since antiquity, most famously in Greece, where the nature of democracy is theorised by its enemies, i.e. by the historians who write the history of Greece, and by thinkers like Aristotle and Plato, as they try to understand the threat posed by the many to the rule of the best, to aristocracy, or at least to

the constitution of a society in which rich and poor can safely co-exist (to the advantage of the rich). In that sense, the question of capacity is a very broad issue.

Historically, the question of political will comes to the fore when the logic of state and class power itself begins, in the early modern period, to embrace and then emphasise a voluntary dimension. In the wake of the Reformation and Europe's disastrous civil wars, Hobbes and growing numbers of his contemporaries come to accept that stable government requires willing or voluntary obedience from its subjects, rather than merely coerced obedience. What is distinctive about capitalism, furthermore, as it emerges over this same period, is that it governs and rules people through a whole set of mechanisms that solicit and manipulate apparently voluntary consent, as distinct from reliance on brute force (even if the element of coercion also remains important, and in some circumstances predominant, as with the sorts of plantation slavery developed in places like Haiti). In that sense, the primacy of political will is forced on us by the development of history, and has become part of the medium in which we live.

The will is interesting to me, again, because it allows us to make connections between a very broad set of issues. I take the will to be a capacity human beings possess, like reason, like language. But the form it takes changes with time, and with the situation. As Marx said, there has always been reason but it has not always had a rational form. Likewise

with the will: every human being has some sort of faculty of will, but we cannot always recognise its form as voluntary, as this depends on all sorts of factors—psychological, social, technological, and so on. Already at the level of the individual, it's obvious that the will of an infant, or an adolescent, or an adult, involve quite different sorts of capacities, and as Rousseau liked to say, somewhat comparable differences apply to politics as well.

I wanted to start with the question of form because in your text 'Dialectical Voluntarism' published in Radical Philosophy, you are—in parallel with the claim that in each struggle the concept of will is changing—also attempting to universalise the concept of the will of the people. Through that, you are attempting to introduce the will of people as a philosophical category. Apart from discussing it through the issue of force and capacity, you also discuss the will of the people having a collective form. To cut things short, I would like to know how you see the relation between the will of the people and class struggle.

For me the interesting problem is how far class positions should be understood to determine, more or less unilaterally, political priorities or projects. Marx sometimes suggests that the proletariat will be compelled to act in certain ways because of 'what it is', and what it is in the process of becoming. Lenin and Trotsky continued to emphasise this, and to assume that the development of a conscious and

revolutionary proletarian ‘mission’ proceeded hand in hand with the development of capitalism. For all the explanatory power of such a position I think it remains a simplification; the consolidation of a ‘collective will’, to use the notion repeatedly stressed by Gramsci, has to be understood on its own terms, as a process that involves all kinds of desires, hopes, critiques, discussions, deliberations, etc., that help to mobilise and empower a collective actor. How might an egalitarian and inclusive actor emerge, a ‘popular’ or mass actor, one concerned with the interests of people in general, or with the people at large – an actor motivated by the common interest, to use old fashioned language – in struggle with and against any group or class that remains wedded to the interests of a privileged few? The political dimension of such emergence is irreducible. I don’t think that you can read political struggles as merely derivative of economic dynamics.

I was also thinking about class struggles in those terms, as Althusser would be referring to it, as something opposite to class relations. Not as a symmetric clash between two groups, but as formations that emerge through the struggle. Without having the struggle we cannot speak about classes. Similar to this, I understand that we cannot speak about the will of people without this will taking place.

I don’t think that just understanding the dynamics of exploitation is enough to fight against it. I don’t think that exploitation and proletarianisation by themselves, as

driven by the way capitalism works (which Marx and Althusser describe very well), will give an account of what the proletariat actually wants and is *capable of*, i.e. of its political will and corresponding political capacity. I don’t think it’s enough to analyse the tendencies that ‘classify’ members of a class, e.g. as proletarian or petty bourgeois, to determine their political will. Sometimes Marx and Engels are too hasty on this score. Think for instance of the way Marx compares the sort of ‘political psychology’ that corresponds to various class positions in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, for instance, written in the wake of 1848. The petty-bourgeoisie and peasantry will tend to vacillate, Marx assumes, because of their intermediary and permanently precarious class position. Under pressure they will tend to shelter behind the authority of a protector, or as it happens, behind the fantasmatic figure of an emperor. The proletariat, by contrast, would eventually be compelled to confront exploitation directly, and put an end to it; it has no choice. Its sense of purpose and discipline is consistent with the economic tendencies that define and consolidate it, precisely as a class with nothing to lose but its chains, a class with no profound national or religious loyalties, etc.

You find some of this in Lenin too. On the one hand he knows that to build a hegemonic political force you need to organise, you need a political party, you need to gather and share information, you need to explain to people what the general situation is, and you need to go

through all that work in order to persuade a majority of people what their true interests are, and who they can trust to pursue them. Lenin sets great store by the importance of gaining majority support. Lenin is convinced that as time goes on, over the course of 1917, a majority of people, or at least a majority of people organised in the soviets, will come to trust the Bolshevik party more than the old guard, or Kerensky. And of course he’s proved right about that. The problem is that he also tends to think of the Bolshevik party as the more or less immediate or direct embodiment of working class interests, so that, again, you can almost derive what it wants or *wills* from what it *is*. Once you make that assumption you no longer need to verify the degree to which people and party want the same things, in fact, by trying to find out what people *actually* want, what their actual will is. This is highly problematic in principle, of course, and ultimately it proves a fatal simplification. The process whereby people work out what they think and will is a constant, ongoing process of reflection, deliberation, debate, argument, back and forth, and there is no shortcut to that.

This connects to the question of representation. You say in your article that will is “material power and active empowerment before it is a matter of Representation”. I want to connect this with your critique of postcolonialism, in that most of the theoreticians you mention criticise representation in some way. Their main argument is against

representation of the other. I would like to know how you relate this question concretely with the will of the people.

One of the reasons why I’m critical of Deleuze is that he simply rejects representation. Not only Deleuze, but most of the philosophers that are important to him as well. I don’t want to reject representation out of hand; it is about putting representation in its proper place, understanding its role, which should be one of contributing to the more fundamental question of building, organising and concentrating collective capacity. In any situation that is too big for direct democracy, you certainly need forms of representation or at least delegation to organise and to concentrate the will of large numbers of people, and public elections (one person one vote) are often a good way of choosing delegates or representatives. But there’s a big difference between choosing delegates to act as spokespeople or representatives of their constituents, conveying and clarifying what they want, helping to realise their objectives, etc., and the privileging of formal representation as such – the sort of effectively dis-organising or dispersing representative mechanisms embraced by people like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, or by the more moderate French revolutionaries, precisely as a means of countering the risks of mass empowerment or popular mobilisation.

In many of your writings, you define politics as clarification, concentration, organisation; it has nothing

in common with Deleuzian and postcolonial project of hybrid and rhizomatic understanding of the processes. This brings the discussion to Frantz Fanon, as he wrote about the understanding of politics that you relate to the concept of the politics of will. There you especially mention his discussion on the question of consciousness. As the unconscious is more of the hot topic when discussing the politics at the moment, this reference to consciousness strikes as a bit odd. It is, retrospectively, at odds with issues such as desire, irrational, subconscious, which are favoured by postcolonialists, and on the other hand, politically it brings Fanon's position very close to Lenin.

Yes, I agree, but also it brings Lenin closer to Rousseau and the Jacobins. In Lenin, the emphasis on consciousness is crucial, of course, but there are a couple of things that are striking. One is that the consciousness in question is not first and foremost the consciousness of a particular actor or group *per se*; it is more a matter of working out precisely what is to be done in a particular situation, and of how we can change it. The consciousness itself, so to speak, comes from whoever and whatever can help us understand how we might be able to change the situation. As Lenin famously said, people whose social position is structured fundamentally by exploitation are not necessarily in a position to understand such exploitation and what needs to be done to be rid of it, because their understanding has been partly shaped by it. The elemental or 'spontaneous'

consciousness of the workers in such a situation will be partly shaped by the prevailing logic of that situation. To that extent they would remain 'spontaneously' trade-unionists or reformists—this is what's at stake in his notorious thesis that revolutionary consciousness has to come "from without", i.e. from the doctrine of socialism worked out by intellectuals like Marx and Engels, who have managed to figure out how exploitation really works.

This leads to a second point: if the consciousness of what needs to be done has to come partly from 'without' then a consciousness is always partly bound up in a learning or educational process. Consciousness isn't fixed in advance; needless to say it can learn, expand, intensify, generalise. People can learn from others, they can also teach themselves, and learn from experience. Lenin often emphasises this pedagogical dimension in the development of class consciousness. Same with Fanon, when it comes to confronting colonialism and developing national consciousness, i.e. when it comes to learning what must be done, first spontaneously and then deliberately, in order to commit to national liberation from colonial rule. Fanon's point of departure is comparable to Lenin; he stresses the elementary but far-reaching point that if you live in a profoundly racist society then your 'lived experience' will partly shaped by this, and you will tend to internalise racist reflexes. Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, is largely about the lived experience of what it is to be black in a racist

society, and the sorts of neurosis that arise as a result.

Consciousness is a capacity that can grasp the way it has been shaped, and then seek to reshape itself; it is a self-educating, in that sense. That is why Lenin and Fanon both emphasise it (and Sartre too, of course). As far as I'm concerned the key reference here remains Rousseau and the Jacobins. The Jacobins' emphasis on will and education is distinctively Rousseauist in the sense that they stress the means by which you can become more or less aware of how you became the person that you now are. Rousseau works on himself; in his later work in particular, he asks repeatedly, how did I become Jean-Jacques Rousseau? He likewise reflects on how society became the way it is, i.e. how it became so corrupt, unequal, and oppressive, in order to show that it did indeed become so, historically; and since this was a historical rather than a 'natural' or inevitable process so then it can be transformed, and made otherwise. There is nothing natural or unalterable about corruption and inequality. Fundamentally, then, the aim is to understand how political consciousness and character can be changed. People can overcome mis-education, they can re-educate themselves. They can change their minds, in the various senses of that phrase.

What is then, generally, the relationship between communism and will? You criticise the Deleuzian concepts of capital as the subject which drives history, and where the proletariat is only derivative of that process. Quoting Lukács, you write that "the

proletariat forms itself by its day-to-day action. It is action. If it ceases to act, it decomposes". How does the will transform in the day-to-day action? Or, is there some kind of general will here at the work, which is different from the day-to-day particular will? These questions call for a re-questioning of some principal concepts of communist theory. Are these the reasons why Althusser criticised voluntarism? And would you say that Badiou also has some kind of ambiguous relationship to voluntarism, or the will.

Yes, I've tried to address this in a few places.

What I want to ask is whether dialectical voluntarism will challenge some fundamental principles of communist theory?

Communism can mean different things. In one version of the Marxist tradition it can be understood as a stage of historical development, carried by 'the real movement of things', that would follow on a sequence leading from feudalism to capitalism to socialism. It can figure as the second of two stages of transition after capitalism, where socialism would be an initial transitional stage, marked by the dictatorship of the proletariat, and thus by the persistence of the state (as argued for instance in Lenin's *The State and Revolution*), i.e. by the use of dictatorial powers to socialise production and to collectivise ownership of the means of production. Communism, in this case, would be the result of that phase

once such forms of dictatorial power are no longer required; then, the idea goes, you would have non-coercive social relations where each member of society receives according to their needs and each gives according to their means. And that would certainly be a good way to live! The problem is how to get there. Again I think there's no shortcut: as Blanqui likes to say, but also Lenin, you can't introduce communism against the will of the people who need to make it work.

In any significant transition, you need to know what people really want, where they are really *headed*, so to speak. My own view is that we can trust people to work out what is just and equitable if we all do everything possible to ensure that we are indeed truly free, and able, to do what is necessary to work this out. We need then to be free to assemble or combine, to discuss and deliberate, to make decisions and to implement or impose them, and so on. I think that the process of this voluntary and collective 'working out' of the people's will, so to speak, has normative criteria of its own, criteria that are already implied in the way we use these basic ideas of 'will' on one hand and 'people' on the other. As Gramsci suggests, analysis of the way collective wills actually take shape and change over time gives you an account of concrete political processes that is lacking in the mere concept of communism *per se*. It's always important to ask how exactly we might really arrive at a particular historical configuration or a particular social arrangement. You could have the most perfect

egalitarian society imaginable, but if it is imposed on people by some kind of philosopher king, or by a party, an autocrat, then you can be sure it will not work. My own view is that if people are genuinely free to determine their own course of action, if we are suitably associated, inclusive, informed, resolute, forceful, and so on, then we can trust ourselves to make just and equitable decisions, and to revise them as necessary.

This is what's at stake in affirming 'the will of the people', as a normative concept: we can only do this on condition that it's both truly (a) a matter of will or volition, i.e. of voluntary, deliberate and conscious self-determination, and also (b) truly a matter of 'people' in general, i.e. of generic humanity as such, without any criteria of exclusion (apart from the exclusion of those who refuse precisely this affirmation, i.e. who insist on retaining their own particular privileges). Taken together, I think that these two criteria are enough to orient ways of thinking about political processes that could lead us towards a communist society.

Are one of those criteria, to speak in terms of your own philosophical ideas, the communist position as a subjective prescription? You also write that when communism is reduced to the rationalisation of the objective conditions, then the falling apart starts.

Yes, absolutely. Here I agree very much with Badiou, and with Lenin too. There is no escaping the

question of what could be called political morality, the way an actor decides what they should and will do – and I prefer the term *actor*, rather than of the terms of 'subject' or 'agent', since what's at issue is the question of action, or of will and action, since 'voluntary action' is a pleonasm.

You write, referring to Auguste Blanqui, that in politics, once the decision is made there is no returning back. I like the way how you want to save Blanqui from Walter Benjamin who interprets him as an example of the romantic idea of defeatism. Your claim is that there are endless possibilities to choose, and when deliberately choosing a side there is no further ambiguity anymore.

Any significant commitment or decision will have consequences by definition, and they can be irreversible. When important things are at stake I think it's important to act on the assumption they will indeed be irreversible—whether they actually will prove irreversible, or not, is a question you cannot control in advance. Same for any revolutionary process, insofar as it seems to involve irreversible change. But you cannot know in advance whether that is what is going to happen. There is a striking speech by Saint-Just in March 1794, in which he effectively said to the Convention: "if you manage to do the following things, essentially if you manage to set up a society based on virtue and commitment to the common good, and if you can avoid the creation of a new

ruling class, then I will guarantee you made a revolution. But if you fail to do these then all we will have done is to have a go at it, we'll have just made an attempt." Or words to that effect. So for Saint-Just, five years on, the question of whether we are really making the revolution—is this process really a revolution?—still hasn't been irreversibly decided; it is something the actors have to continue to decide! As Robespierre had already asked, back in November 1792, the key question to be asked of people making a revolution is always: "do you want a revolution?" And since to will the end is to will the means, it's incoherent "to want a revolution without a revolution." After Robespierre, perhaps nobody understood this better than Blanqui.

Are you really prepared to do what you want, i.e. to do what it takes? This applies to any act of will, large or small, personal or political. The nature of the decision, if you like, is such that it can have irreversible consequences only if you commit to those consequences. The nature of voluntary action is that it can always be undone. The will cannot 'shackle itself' to the future without cancelling itself out. Rousseau insists on this. Sovereign power is defined in part by its capacity to remake itself, almost as if *ex nihilo*. This applies to anything that involves voluntary commitment. Whether it is a matter of love, education, or everyday life, you can always change these things; there can always be a 'change of heart', so to speak. What allows it to persist is the actors' own determination to persist. There is no other guarantee.

Today, in some circles, the idea of withdrawal is discussed as a political process. You are criticising this in your book on postcolonialism when discussing the difference between singularity and specificity. I think that withdrawal is where the reaction starts. This also has the repercussions regarding the question of education, which now in artist and activist circles is politicised as unlearning.

Spivak sometimes draws on this term.

Yes. That was in my mind. You quote Fanon saying that everything can be explained to people on the single condition that you really want them to understand, from The Wretched of the Earth. I think this is the best description of the knowledge of the people. How do you relate this to Rancière's argument that "everyone thinks"? It is interesting the way how you interpret this egalitarian knowledge in Rancière as something artistic and theatrical. You are describing these staged acts as an anarchistic concept of equality. How are you differentiating the theatrical or artificial concept of egalitarian knowledge and education, from the political concept of knowledge and education?

It's not that Fanon says people (already) know, he says that people can know. This is the first and most basic point: people can learn. Either they can teach themselves, or they can be taught – which is a long way from the assumption that people cannot learn! Or that only experts can act for them, on their behalf.

What Fanon, but also Che, Mao, or Rousseau, stress is that there is nothing too difficult in politics for anyone to understand. The fundamental Rousseauist gesture, already in his first discourse on the arts and sciences, is that there is nothing about art or science, nothing about their alleged levels of complexity and sophistication, that fundamentally puts them out of the reach of ordinary people. Or that gives to them a depth that ordinary people cannot grasp, a refinement that they cannot appreciate. Instead, Rousseau punctures that entire myth, which of course favours those distinguished few who already have that kind of special, distinguishing access to sophistication or expertise. To say that everybody can understand everything is also Jacques Rancière's basic postulate, and I think that is in line with his initial and fundamental or ongoing quasi-Maoism, as it is with his contemporaries Badiou and Lardreau.

The second point is—and this is another Rousseauist principle—that people can not only learn but also act, in both the theatrical and political sense. People can play roles, they can take on roles, they can play parts in dramas that they themselves stage, or (in Rousseauist or Jacobin terms) in public festivals that they themselves arrange. In his letter to D'Alembert, Rousseau affirms popular celebrations that people stage themselves, without having any specialist knowledge or expertise, any refinement that sets them apart from or above their fellows. All you have to learn is how to play a particular role, a particular part. Everyone can learn that. We can all learn the roles

we need to play, politically. Or, we can learn to organise the capacities we need to make this possible. I take this to be the fundamental gesture of political optimism: that we can acquire all of the capacities we need to play the roles required in order to accomplish our will. At the same time, we need to avoid the risk that such gestures be treated (as with Rancière or Sartre, arguably) as theatrical in too literal or narrow a sense, or that that they be over-aestheticised.

This is what I was meaning to discuss; the danger to reduce it to a mere performative action.

There is this danger in Rancière, in my opinion, that it becomes a kind of literal staging of roles in ways that are both temporary and contingent—such that you build a temporary public stage, literally or metaphorically, in which people can suspend all of the different roles and functions that might otherwise shape their society. But then such exceptional stagings last only as long as an exception can last. There is also another, more or less opposite danger in some of the Rousseauist discourse, an emphasis on integrity and authenticity of the popular stage, meaning that what public intellectuals should do is to contribute something to an ongoing national drama, played out in real time by 'the people themselves'.

Is this the trajectory of decolonialist intellectuals like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, for example?

Exactly. The goal there is a sort of neo-Rousseauist project whereby people stage their own liberation directly and exclusively on their own terms, in their own language, internal to their own points of reference.

You also seem to find a bit of nationalistic-romantic Herderism in that.

It has been a long while since I read Herder, but yes, I think so. I think there is a perfectly legitimate insistence, in Ngũgĩ, on recovering our own capacity—for example in speaking and thinking, and publishing in our own language—but he then goes on to give fairly strict prescriptions for how to stage it, for instance as a contribution to the patriotic project. But it's hard to be prescriptive about this sort of thing; there's always some legitimate room for debate about how far an emancipatory project should be 'narrowly' patriotic, and how far it should instead be international, or trans-continental. The Cuban revolution is exemplary in this respect, e.g. in Che's movement towards a tri-continentalist perspective.

Is not Fanon best representative of this?

Both Fanon and Che, of course, are literally internationalist patriots, people who adopt another country's project as their own: someone from Martinique who fights for Algeria; an Argentinean who understands the national-liberation project in Guatemala first of all,

and later in Cuba, then in the Congo, or Bolivia.

This form of nationalism is emancipated from the cultural references; in there the nation means capacity more than the culture.

But the dimension of culture is important in Fanon, and very important for someone like Amílcar Cabral. The key question is less ‘cultural authenticity’, whatever that means, than whether or not a project or expression contributes to a collective-building or nation-building culture understood as an emancipatory and empowering project. If you have been mis-educated through the internalisation of racist or colonial prejudice, for instance, it’s essential to correct such mis-education by undercutting or reversing it, say by re-appropriating your own language, your own tradition, your own sense of self, your own *négritude*. This inevitably runs the risk of drawing on the sort of politics of cultural authenticity that Fanon was always wary of, but the point isn’t to stop with this re-appropriation; the goal isn’t to align yourself with the determining forces of your language, tradition or past, but to recover by all means necessary the capacities you need to be truly free and self-determining, and thus open to the future that you want to make – the future that you want to will into existence. Fanon is very clear about not wanting to be defined by the past, or by his colour, or by his people’s history, how-ever oppressive it might be. I am a self-determining free person,

he insists, who lives as a free person with other self-determining people.

What matters, again, is what people are ready to do, what they are capable of doing, what they want, what their priorities are; what thresholds they are prepared to cross, what struggles they are willing to wage, to what end, with what means, and at what cost.

This is why at the beginning of the interview I start with the question of the formalisation of the will. Now, I can repeat the same question in a better way: is it possible to formalise the will through detecting the threshold you are talking about?

Again, I think the basic notion of a popular will or ‘will of the people’ offers a simple and thus useful way of summarising some of the normative criteria that can help to answer these sorts of questions, at least in general. There’s a basic difference between a reference to people in general, and reference to specific groups or classes of people, however they might be classified. And there’s a basic difference between voluntary and involuntary actions, e.g. actions or behaviour that might be driven by instinct or reflex, or else more or less forcefully imposed on you, coerced, or involuntary in the sense of something not deliberately thought through, for instance something that might be a matter of habit. To insist on the peculiar quality of voluntary actions helps clarify the sorts of distinctions or threshold at issue in such questions, but I don’t think it’s a matter of

‘formalising’ the issue, in the sense of offering a blueprint or recipe for what’s involved.

that it’s a matter of political will, of our own self-determination, then it remains up to us.

Is prescription something related to this. “Prescriptive politics presumes the exclusion of any middle or third positions, it is about confrontation of two contrary positions.” [You are inscribing relationship to prescription, while giving certain autonomy or relative distance from socio-economic causation?]

Well, I think that sooner or later a political process or mobilisation will arrive such decisive points, if it’s under pressure, and if it matters, i.e. if it really challenges established forms of power or privilege. To engage in a process of willing something, rather than merely wanting it or wishing for it—and so of participating in a process that crosses a threshold from want to will—means that you arrive at something like what Badiou simply calls, in his relatively recent work, a ‘point’. A point in this sense involves a decision, an either-or or a yes-or-no; it poses a challenge or obstacles, which demands that you either cross it and move forward, or else refuse and retreat.

In other words there comes a point with any project when the question arises, with a more or less intense existential urgency: shall you continue, or stop? Either you say yes, or you say no. You persevere or retreat. In the end this is up to us. Of course there are factors that influence us one way or another, and often these factors can be experienced as very powerful, if not irresistible. But to the degree