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The political theology of modern conviction

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Cool Passion

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Cool Passion
The Political Theology of Conviction

Inaugural Lecture

delivered upon the installation as
Professor of Anthropology
at the University of Amsterdam
on Friday 25 May 2007

by

Thomas Blom Hansen

 VOSSIUSPERS UVA

*Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus,
Mijnheer de Decaan,
Geachte aanwezigen,*

Why do people commit themselves so deeply to abstractions and ideas that they risk life and limbs in order to do things that are at odds with their everyday lives? How do humans fall in intense love with abstractions they can never see, touch or even sense but only vaguely imagine as ideas, or ‘principles’? I am interested here in how modern political and scientific imaginaries transformed the very structure and procedure of belief, and the objects and principles one can believe in. The key term in such an investigation must be how the modern notion of *conviction* comes into being as a global model of interiority.

In the last decade or so, belief has ceased to be a valid category. Instead the notion of ‘belief-as-practice’ has drawn sustenance from Foucault’s work on how subjectivity is anchored in disciplines of the body, and from Asad’s work on the importance of monastic disciplines in creating the Christian subject (Foucault 1998; Asad 1993; Bell 1993). The central argument is here that ‘inner belief’ never is a cause but always an unstable effect of rituals, disciplines and bodily practices – an effect so fragile and unstable that it necessitates daily prayer and ritual. This insight has been helpful in making interiority accessible as a series of practices that can be studied, also as ritualized repetition of texts and words. This body of work never addresses the key question: why is the experience of belief in today’s world so often narrated as a story of interiority? Why, and in what style, do people insist that they have ‘deep beliefs’ or convictions; that they have a dramatic interior life; and that certain experiences and moments made them embrace their convictions? We need to ask how such ideals of proper personhood – equipped with interiority and conviction – became a globally influential model of the self?

Another trend has been to study and understand religious experience through emotions and the senses. The argument here, inspired by Bourdieu (1977, 1991)

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Merleau-Ponty (1945, 2003) and many others, is also ‘anti-intellectualist’ in that it proposes that religious persuasion and experience work through bodily sensations – music, sound, image and crowd experiences. This line of reasoning has been productive in studies of mediated images in religious experience.¹ Both of these lines of argument share a mistrust of ‘the word’, and of the narratives of belief and conviction. They are aligned with the burgeoning interest in the unadulterated, if not authentic, realm of the affective and sensory, i.e. sensory intensities and motivations that are ‘not yet recognized and narrativized’ as Brian Massumi puts it in his re-interpretation of Deleuze and Spinoza. (Massumi 2002)

Can we assume that bodily experience is more ‘real’ or more authentic than the experience of the mind? Do we have to embark on the ‘reverse Cartesianism’ that marks much of the work on affect as an autonomous, non-discursive force? (Bennett 2001, Connolly 2003) Is it not a fact that ‘belief’, or conviction, signify a powerful desire for a cognitive and ethical ground for being and conduct? An ‘external guarantee’ that completes one’s being and moral sentiments and without which many feel rudderless and adrift?

I am interested in how this desire became constituted, and how modern convictions – the love of principles, moral laws and social and political abstractions – became a global answer to this quest.

Modern convictions: a brief genealogy of political love

To make up one’s mind is in English to shape oneself – to deliberate, to say and then to do it. In the Germanic languages the term ‘bestimme’, ‘Bestimmung’, means to put in voice and words and also to decide and rule. The links between decision, conviction and action are crucial to the revealed religions of Christianity and Islam. But actions, however purposeful, are not in themselves signs of conviction.

An act of will can be a sovereign act if we, following Bataille, understand sovereignty as an expression of life itself and as acts that disregard and defy the possibility of death. In Bataille’s terms these acts are archaic, like the ethos of aristocratic pride, the pre-modern warrior ethos, and the senseless destruction of property and life beyond or prior to instrumental reason. (Bataille 1993) Such virtues are still with us today, celebrated in masculine subcultures, in gangs, and during times

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of war and destruction. In this elementary or archaic sense, the will was the sublime expression of a power that simply existed in the world and which occasionally became expressed through individual actions and bodies, but the latter remained vessels for general powers. This is akin to the image of the individual in the classical world which, as Erich Auerbach famously depicted it, was a 'flat world' where individuals did not have depth and individual singularity as in the modern age. (See Auerbach 1951, and Brooks 2002, 102)

In this world, the self expressed something outside itself – the divine, the law, the passions. The care of the soul, reflection and refinement was always more important than the fear of death, or the ordinary life of pleasure.² With Christianity, this general pattern seemed to be broken. Now, the work of the religious imagination was to complete and transform the individual soul into a true expression of God's will and thus dependent on God's gaze. St. Augustine's *Confessions* has detailed descriptions of years of wandering in darkness and sin; accounts of being fully converted to the faith, of lapses of this faith and so on. (Augustin 2004) The addressee is God directly, one assumes (plus the rather few contemporary readers of the work) but not a larger community of believers. The Catholic Church systematized this work of belief as relief in the anonymous confession, performed behind the curtain, directed at God but mediated by the pater who listens in, admonishes and advises – all on behalf of God.

But let me go back three centuries, with Alain Badiou to Saint Paul in order to understand how modern 'convictions' became thinkable. In Badiou's view, Paul is our philosophical contemporary because he lived as a Greek and a Roman citizen at a time where a militarized empire was re-ordering the world and was becoming less tolerant vis-à-vis dissent and deviant beliefs. (Badiou 2003: 4-14) Paul had the audacity to give it all up for what he saw as a universal and transcendent truth: the Christ event. The event was the resurrection, the overcoming of death that proved that Jesus was the son of God. God's grace could be enjoyed by all those who decided to believe in this event as Truth – not an ordinary truth but another larger and abstract truth. Fidelity to this Truth-event founded new subjects, Badiou argues; subjects divided between their everyday existence, and a higher form of subjectivity that transcended desire. (Ibid.: 55-73) The new Christians no longer needed the Law in the conventional sense – neither that of the state nor that of the Jahve. The Law merely regulates evanescent practices, desires and obedience, as opposed to the life in the spirit, the conviction that Truth exists if one decides to

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embrace it, to receive the gift of conviction (*Kharisma*). (Ibid.: 75-85) Those who embrace the three basic principles faith, hope and love – which Badiou updates to conviction, certainty and love – will become charismatic, extraordinary and radiant. (Ibid.: 93)

Badiou argues that this gesture universalizes Christianity, transcends its Jewish roots and founds the idea of militant convictions based on assertions of universal truth. That truth exists as convictions among the faithful who live by it: those who love their neighbors; who utter the truth; who missionize, spread and repeat the word. The utterance is the guarantee, the only ‘proof’ of fidelity needed.

Two dimensions of Badiou’s admittedly quite Protestant account (he is secular non-believer) illuminate how modern convictions were born. Firstly, the idea that both fidelity and certainty must be performative. The militant can never be silent or introvert, he/she must always speak. The performance of the word is not concerned with direct magical efficacy of the utterance – as in healing, exorcising etc. Repeating the word serves to show that the speaker is consistent and committed, and thus trustworthy qua fidelity. In *The Revolution of the Saints*, Walzer suggests that early Calvinists and Puritans affirmed their capacity for ‘plain speaking’, that is criticizing authority, Church and government, by always swearing fidelity to the Word, to the higher truth of Christ. (Walzer 1982) It was customary in seventeenth century Britain to dismiss the evidence given in courts by so-called ‘free thinkers’ or atheists. They could not be trusted because they did not believe in God, in the word, and thus could not have proper fear of death and punishment.

The second useful idea is the split in the subject between a worldly and desiring self, and another self committed to a Truth or a future project, a future perfect. Badiou portrays Paul as a Christian commissar, always on the move, always organizing, converting and advising the masses, enjoying the work which can never be finished while glorifying the suffering and the experience of commitment more than the actual victories. This is sublimation of desire into constancy and selfless work at its purest that also taps the energies of Paul’s own flawed past – as a violent Roman citizen persecuting deviants until he himself was overcome by proof of Christ’s resurrection on the famous road to Damascus.

Yet, Badiou moves too quickly through the centuries and forgets many of the mediations that make Paul recognizable to us today as a modern militant. The most important of those are the permutations of the split Christian subject during Reformation into a subject governed by conscience and the guilt of his own inher-

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ent sinfulness. This paved the way for the emergence of the modern self capable of splitting itself into two: on the one hand a free and autonomous interior self, and, on the other hand, a pragmatic self acting and desiring in the world. In other words, the modern idea of human subjectivity shaped by neither fate nor obedience but by choice and will and always at war with itself and its own weaknesses; always split between the powers of reason and the powers of the affects possessing them, as Spinoza famously argued in the final chapter of his *Ethics*. (Spinoza (1677) 2005)

The invention of sincerity

The key transformation lies in what Lionel Trilling calls ‘the birth of society’ as the new referent of the self from the sixteenth century onwards. (Trilling 1972: 20) It was no longer enough to have interiority and conscience. One’s good intentions and qualities also had to be proved and demonstrated – not to God as in Augustine’s confessions but to society as such. Sincerity of faith was being replaced by sincerity and credibility as a person, as an individual subject. This was an era where multiple new voices were appearing, and where the credibility of the truths expressed in the dominant scholasticism was crumbling, largely under the weight of its own contradictions. (see Blumenberg 1983) It was also an era of increasing geographical and social mobility as Trilling points out. The cultural obsession with deceit, the counterfeit, loyalty and pretense were intense. From plays and novels to the burning questions of conversions, of the sincerity of Jewish converts that so concerned the Inquisition;³ the witch hunts and their endless attempts to exact the right kinds of confession; the proliferation of new Christian sects after the reformation across Europe; and the possibilities of impostors and social pretense as old hierarchies are giving way to new groups and an emerging bourgeoisie. In this atmosphere the question of validation, truth, credibility and sincerity emerge as crucibles but perpetually uncertain as never before. The infamous case of Martin Guerre in the late sixteenth century in south western France, the returned soldier who was accused of being an impostor, became an almost paradigmatic case of the difficulty facing the new regime of truthfulness, sincerity and proof. (see e.g. Zemon-Davis 1983)

With the multiplication of truth claims in the new public sphere, the addressee of performances of commitment became the reading public. The autobiography

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was born somewhere in the late sixteenth century as a means to authenticate oneself – to tell the unadulterated story of oneself to that audience. It was no longer the performance of fidelity to Christianity and its injunctions that counted, but one's fidelity to the truth of the real life of an individual, with all its dramas, conceits and imperfections. One's convictions needed to be embedded in a biography that displayed difficulty, flaws and imperfections. Rousseau's *Confessions* was meant to be published after his death and marks one of the first attempts to provide 'full disclosure' and transparency – to perform a brutally honest assessment of a life as it was lived and perceived from within Jean-Jacques' own mind. (Rousseau 1953)

Rousseau, who all his life was haunted by real and imagined enemies, wanted to demonstrate that he was an extraordinary figure and should be honored as such, not least for his courage to appear sincere as in the original meaning – *sin cera* – without wax, or gloss. He created a model for type of public behavior, the idealist whose credibility, strength of ideas and autonomy as an individual were supported by his own unflinching and uncompromising adherence to an *ethics of sincerity*.

This ideal matured in the eighteenth century and became one that valued truthfulness and morally consistency in one's approach to strangers, neighbors and allies. We can also call it an *ethics of the other* because the emphasis was on the ethical conduct by the responsible individual. The key was the rise of reason as a public ideal, the emergence of the economy and the ideal of empathy as the heart of civilized sociality. The passions were commonly seen as an elemental force in human life, also by enlightenment thinkers. (Hirschman 1977) The fundamental new idea was that human self-interest in commercial affairs would be the most effective civilizer and tamer of the passions – love, pride, self-regard, jealousy, etc. With the exposure to *doux commerce*, soft commerce, (Montesquieu 1989) men would become peaceful and controlled, passions would become cool and more peaceable and rational emotions, such as neighborly love, would arise.⁴ This was indeed Adam Smith's proposition in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, his essentially utopian outline of a secular moral economy for a new commercial society. (Smith 2002) Smith's argument was that 'fellow feeling' and empathy arises from the powers of imagination that allows the anonymous other, ('our brother'), to be like us, and us like him, when tortured or subjected to pain:

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‘Though our brother is upon the rack our senses will never inform us of what he suffers (...) by the imagination we place ourselves in his situation (...) we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him. His agonies when they are thus brought home to ourselves, begin at last to affect us.’ (Smith 2002, 9)

The empathy Smith referred to as a natural feeling had in fact been invented and made into a highly popular sentiment by the emergence of the epistolary novel in France, England, Netherlands and Germany in the eighteenth century. This type of novel consisted of letters written by the heroines – most often humble women of the people – who went through terrible ordeals, impossible love and betrayal. Novels such as Rousseau’s *Julie* (1761) and Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-48) – ran into several volumes and generated what Lynn Hunt in her brilliant genealogy of human rights calls ‘torrents of emotion’ and huge attention in the rapidly expanding reading publics in Europe. Hunt argues that these novels ‘taught their readers nothing less than a new psychology’ (Hunt 2007: 39) and that they showed that ‘all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings ... and desire for autonomy’. (Ibid.) She argues that this genre that ‘died mysteriously in 1790s’ (Ibid. 40) actually paved the way for both abolitionist thinking as well as the plausibility of the ideas of rights of man.

I find this a rather convincing idea which also helps us to understand how the idea of ‘love of the people’ came into being in the same period and found its most eloquent formulations during the French Revolution. The men of the revolution loved ‘the people’ in the abstract and could identify with the suffering, noble heroines of these novels. This abstract love was most probably made more attractive and compelling by the difficulties they had in actually extending love to individual members of the Third estate, to their own servants, or to the *sans-culottes* and urban poor that provided the manpower for the revolution and the revolutionary armies.

In other parts of Europe and in North America, the rise of a range of Protestant and Puritan sects popularized what Charles Taylor calls the ‘affirmation of ordinary life’. The sacred moved out of the churches and away from the monastic specialists and into the most mundane aspects of everyday life – hard work, restraint, sincerity and frugality. The pursuit of such ideals in everyday life became ways to do God’s work and to further the Divine plan, and with it grew ideas of

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the dignity of one's calling and the ultimate equality of men in being sinful but also sharing the possibility of having their souls saved. (Taylor 1992, 211-247) In both cases, 'the people' or ordinary life could become objects of love because of the sincerity and elementary form of humanity they expressed and embodied – at least from a certain distance.

Conviction as an Inner Law

The interest in empathy and sincerity firmed up as rationality became a preeminent public value at the end of the eighteenth century. It was no longer enough to be sincere; one also had to be rational and commit oneself to higher and more universal truths. Immanuel Kant added a crucial element to modern convictions: judgment as the essential human capacity that anchors the cool passion of the new responsible and autonomous self in an interior law, in moral duty and in practical responsibility.

The split in the subject was central to Kant as the very pre-condition for cultivating that higher realm of transcendental reason, the supersensible, or the noumenal, the site of transcendental truth and the categorical imperative: reaching for that which is more general, universal and thus more true than any ordinary experience or assessment of objects, desires and the senses, or what Kant calls 'practical judgment'. It is the specifically human gift (or *Kharisma*) to possess this faculty and it is therefore the duty of mature and enlightened men to cultivate this in order to reach for higher levels of knowledge and moral conduct. Kant was, however, fully aware that the ability to obey one's own moral law requires something more, something that cannot be fully explained. In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, (Kant 1960) Kant suggested that the predisposition towards embracing or creating a moral law is 'incomprehensible' and that it thus 'announces a divine origin' and exalts men to 'sacrifice in respect of his duty' (45). Later Kant admitted that the miracle of the will and the soul can never be fully known: 'Not even does a man's inner experience with regard to himself enable him to fathom the depths of his own heart.' (54)

He also realized that living a responsible life is difficult because the inner law, the injunction to be reasonable and to reach for the transcendental, always feels like something alien in oneself, as something that does not fit. In her superb study

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of Kant through a Lacanian lens, Alenka Zupancic argues that Kant realizes that our deepest inclinations may not be for the good:

‘The defining feature of a free act is precisely that it is entirely foreign to the subject’s inclinations (...) The self does not “live at home” (...) and the subject’s freedom does in fact reside in “foreign body”.’ (Zupancic 2000, 23)

With the Kantian ethics it was no longer enough to be sincere and true to oneself. One must reach higher and deeper and reach for an ethical consistency that also has a more universal and transcendental element. The imperative of consistency impels self-doubt: has my own weaker self let me down? Does it disappoint that other self, the more perfect, principled self that also exists within me because of its commitment to a larger truth? The challenge for anyone with convictions becomes to live not just in one’s own truth but in ‘Truth’ with an imperative of consistency in thought and action: my higher self is not just my own. It is universal and social, shared with others in texts, speech and principles, and not merely a ‘social role’ but a deep subjectivity. It must prevail over my lower self. The challenge is to love one’s principles so much that they not merely repress one’s desires but actually become identical with desire. One must not merely domesticate one’s inner law, one must love and desire it.

Hegel takes these insights several steps further and into a more explicit political realm. Enamored as he was by both the Jacobins and the notion of the *Weltgeist*, Hegel comes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel (1807/1977)) close to be the philosopher *par excellence* of militant conviction as a reflexive *and* practical realization of universal truth and ‘absolute freedom’ through determined action. The key for Hegel is conscience that becomes the most important faculty in the self-consciousness that is seduced by what he calls the ‘majesty of absolute self-sufficiency’. (Ibid., 393) In this new type of mind it becomes necessary to curb the temptations of ‘pure duty’ – which we may translate as unreflexive reproduction of habits and conventions, obedience, etc. Such an impulse is ‘indifferent to every content’ (Ibid., 389) and thus likely to stray from the path of the universal. The other temptation for Hegel is the inward looking, contemplative ‘beautiful soul’ which Hegel mocks as being so much in love with its own purity and sincerity that action is pre-empted: ‘It lives in dread of staining the radiance of its inner being by action and existence. And to preserve the purity of its heart it flees from contact

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with actuality and perseveres in a state of self-willed impotence...’ In the end it has no consequence and ‘it vanishes as a shapeless vapor dissolving into thin air.’ (Ibid., 400)

Hegel insists that conscience has to reach for something universal – first through speaking and language, and secondly through action. A certain conscience means nothing and cannot reach for the universal, which in Hegel often means the supra-individual and the social, if it is not expressed: ‘Consciousness expresses its conviction: in this conviction alone is the action duty: it holds good as duty too, solely by the conviction of being expressed’. (Ibid., 396) Further, Hegel asserts

‘The universality lies in the form of the act. It is this form which is to be affirmed as real: the form is the self which as such is actual in language, pronounces itself to be the truth, and by just so doing acknowledges all other selves and are recognized by them.’ (Ibid., 397)

With this mediation we can begin to establish the link between St. Paul and the imperative of pronouncing the word, and modern revolutionary politics where words both *are* and *make* the truth. Not just of the person’s soul in an act of confession, nor in the effete beautiful soul, but in a more muscular pronouncing of the truth about the world. That very effort is at the heart of acquiring and maintaining one’s convictions. One cannot be born with convictions, they do not come easily. They have to be lodged in a biography and a self-narrative in which conviction arrives as the final element and turning point that enables one to become a full person. Such narratives of becoming, of reaching fullness and maturity by acquiring a larger point of view, do indeed have a structure that seems to repeat the Christian (Pauline/Augustine) story of living in sin or darkness before encountering the miracle of truth. But they are much more generalized than that.

From sincerity to consequence

This second form of conviction was much stronger, more seductive and more totalizing, driven by an investment in a future perfect, something to come. Rather than a commitment to the other, or the neighbor, it was a commitment to a principle, the coming utopia, or a secret and yet to be revealed plan, what Žižek

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recently has called ‘the third’ (Zizek 2005, 134-190). Let us call this second form an *ethics of consequence*.

Here in this militant mode, the audience and the recognition did not come from a wider society which persecuted or despised you. The militant was committed to serve ‘the people’ or the nation, or even God’s plan, but the loyalty was to an abstraction and to the future perfect, never to any individual.

The recognition now came from an imputed gaze that was akin to that of the gaze of God – from an imagined gaze from the future that would recognize someone as a hero who died for the cause, from the metaphysics of History, the Party, or from the comrades he/she fought and conspired with. This was a radically different modality, where having conviction made one a keeper of a sublime secret, sublime knowledge of what was right and wrong, what was expedient and non-expedient. The actual other had a face, that which was uniquely human as Levinas would put it, but the individual other could never be the object of this form of political love. Only abstractions such as the people, the nation, or the masses could. For those who shared the same sublime truth, it was admissible to remove or kill ordinary people, enemies, and traitors, if it served the higher purpose. Violence could be purifying and necessary in order to create a new and just order. The paradigmatic example remains the Jacobins of the French Revolution who inaugurated a new style of ‘politics of the cause’ that were later perfected in Leninist and revolutionary movements of the twentieth century. Listen to Robespierre defending the infamous Committee of Public Safety which he chaired in 1793:

‘Individuals are not at issue here; we are concerned with the homeland and principles. I tell you plainly: it is impossible, in this state of affairs, for the Committee to save the state; and if anyone disagrees, I will remind you just how treacherous and extensive is the scheme for bringing us down and dissolving us.’⁵

In this commitment to the sublime secret, the embrace of one’s own convictions intensified because its objects and ‘proofs’ (that which can perpetually convince) were so difficult to establish. One method was the reification and rehearsal of the word. Modern Left militancy has historically been intrinsically obsessed with the word and the canonical text, its correct and sincere pronunciations and so on.

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(Yurchak 2005) A wrong word, the lack of a particular word could cause a crisis, a split or exclusion from the cell or the party, or even worse. The rehearsal of ideological narratives and truths happened in the presence of comrades who could be loved and cared for. The ethics of sincerity now became displaced from society at large to the interior of the movement. The proof of ones sincerity and true commitment were to be found in displays of loyalty and love within the parallel society and micro-cosmos established by the militant movement.

Within this register the question of action also moved from the individual and his/her sincerity to the collective as a ground for all action. A militant could never act on his/her own. Being ethically good and sincere in one's care for the 'neighbor' was in this view of no real consequence if not embedded in a larger vision of transformation.

An even more powerful proof of the worthiness of commitment was the presence of enemies within, of traitors, those who did not love the 'law', the cause, the party enough. Their very existence proved that the enemy was getting at us, but also that the struggle was worthwhile and dangerous. Giving up would make all past sacrifices and deaths both meaningless and of no consequence.

In this modality, conviction was totalizing and highly eroticized. The commitment dissolved the distinction between itself and the desires and moral order of ordinary life. It also allowed for a bifurcation of the world into 'our morality', calibrated for those who know and share the secret and the necessity of the true path; and 'their morality', the injunctions and prohibitions which ordinary people live by, all of which can be disregarded by the militant. The firm conviction of embodying a new and universal Law of transcendental quality made it possible, even necessary, to violently overturn the ordinary world of sense perception and convention.

Inspired by Slavoj Žižek's works on ideology (esp. Žižek 1989; 1992) one can propose the following reading of the ethics of consequence: my moral law, is an alien body in me, but it is more in me than myself. I cannot fully fathom it but I desire to fully know it. I want to be it, and to let myself be subject of it – to enjoy the sensation of consistency and Oneness it gives me – with my comrades, with the cause and also with my true self. 'It' acts in me, makes me act and endure things I could never have done without its presence. My own and 'older' self that desires simple and sensuous things, raises its head sometimes, only to be re-disci-

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plined and kicked into line as weakness, or folly, by this other, and unyielding militant self that is fully *aufgehoben*, majestically self-sufficient and never in doubt.

In Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, the celebrated hero of the revolution turned the commissar of the people, Rubashov (Koestler had Bukharin in mind), is arrested for reasons unknown to him. During the first days in his cell he remains confident that it all is a mistake, but after some time doubts start to creep in. He begins to speculate if the leader, Number One, has insights, or reasons, that only can be seen from that highest level in the party, the apex of historical reason. Can such reasons justify that he, Rubashov, should be punished? Is the punishment he is about to receive, a historical necessity for the party and the proletariat to progress further? In his diary he notes in pithy phrases: 'For us the question of subjective good faith is of no interest. He who is in the wrong must pay; he who is right will be absolved (...) History put me where I stood; I have exhausted the credit which she accorded me; if I was right I have nothing to repent, if wrong, I will pay.' (*Darkness at Noon*, p. 83)

The person of militant conviction should not merely pronounce the truth but had to live it. Suffering or deprivations that could have been avoided were proof of the will to reject the easy life. One must say no to convention, Rubashov tells a young disillusioned German communist, and instead follow the 'narrow but sharply defined path in the mountains. (...) the air is thin, he who becomes dizzy is lost.' (41) The young comrade retorts: 'Perhaps it is too cold up on our mountain path. The others have music and bright banners and sit around a warm fire. Perhaps that is why they have won.' Rubashov's response is to kick him out of the party, and to leave him to a certain death at the hands of the Nazis. His conviction was not strong enough, and the cause always bigger than any individual.

We find in Hannah Arendt, one of the greatest critics of totalitarian political desires, a profound recognition of the potency of this ethics of consequence which she in turn attempts to salvage from its totalitarian perversion and excess. In one of her finest essays, 'What is Freedom', Arendt outlines what she calls 'the miracle of freedom' that only is attainable through political action (Arendt 2000, 438-461) Truly political acts are radically different from the older Christian doctrine of 'inner freedom – the inward space into which men may escape from external coercion and this *feel free*'. (Ibid. 440) She continues: 'Freedom as a demonstrable fact and politics coincide and are related to each other like two sides of the same matter.' (Ibid. 442)

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For Arendt, freedom is essentially conviction but only attainable in the political and public realm through action that reaches out, is open-ended, non-instrumental and derived from a principle – love, equality, glory but also fear or hatred. In all cases, action creates newness and provides the creative, if sometimes terrifying, moments of political life. The courage of conviction are vital: ‘Courage liberates men from their worry about life, for the freedom of the world. Courage is indispensable because in politics not life but the world is at stake.’ (448)

This is at sharp odds with standard liberal notion of freedom as a mere choice between existing alternatives. Modern convictions require one to be imprisoned by one’s own desire to create something new, something better. In the gesture of self-imprisonment within one’s own principles one demonstrates pure political love, sincerity and also a sovereign disregard for danger and death. This remains the most powerful technique of political persuasion in modern societies across the world. The examples of self-abnegation and voluntary suffering, of making freedom and conviction into what Arendt called a ‘demonstrable fact’ as the road to credibility abound: from religious saints and martyrs, political saints as Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara to Nelson Mandela. The latest example of this may be Bin Laden whose credibility across the Muslim world may lie less with the rhetorical power of his statements⁶ than in the story of his life, the renouncer, the man who literally elects to walk in the narrow path in the mountains, rather than living the cushy life of a minor Saudi prince.

But how did this become a global modality of action, and a global model of the self?

Convictions as a global grammar of interiority: Biographies of three selfless workers

Marcel Mauss begins his famous essay on the human mind by stating that ‘the ‘self’ (*moi*) is everywhere present but it is not clearly expressed by a ‘me’ or an ‘I’ (*je*). (Mauss 1950/1985) He proceeds to show ‘how recent the category of the self, or “the cult of the self” is’ (*Ibid.*, 3). The procedure Mauss follows in the rest of the essay has been dominant until recently in anthropology: a taxonomic mapping of notions of self and personhood in discrete cultural zones across the world. In Mauss’ mapping the ‘western self’ appears as derived from Christianity recently

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topped by a thin crust of secular and universalist notions of self and personhood. This was elaborated in *The Category of a Person* (Carrithers and Lukes 1985) which mapped cultural zones by contrasting notions of personhood – divided but hierarchical in India; ‘distributed person’ in Melanesia; African cultures marked by dualistic notions of private and public persons, soul and body, etc. However, every ‘culture’ is internally differentiated along lines of gender, class, age, ethnicity, religion and so on. The complexity of selves in a mobile and globalized world vastly exceed any such fixed cultural categories which today in fact reflect a cultural nationalist epistemology positing intrinsic links between territory, culture, religion, race and self-hood.

My proposition is instead that notions of the self, and of personhood, always, anywhere in the world, exist as moral discourses that enunciate cultural *ideals* rather than deep and fixed cultural *ideas*. Such discourses of the self always *proscribe* rather than *describe*.

Enunciations and proscriptions on proper selfhood seek to improve and reform, they seek to expunge the lower self, the base desires, traces of an irrelevant past, embarrassing servitude. Ideals of modern personhood, of action and the purity of interior motivation and self-discipline are invariable set against practices, or others, that are seen as threatening and contaminating. Alain Grosrichard shows how fantasies of Eastern despotism provided the obscene underside in eighteenth century French debates on responsible and enlightened government. Despotism was evoked as a form of perverse power driven by unrestrained desire for, and unrestrained submissiveness to, the despotic gaze. This was, argued Montesquieu, Voltaire and many others, the social condition into which the French would descend unless the monarchy was reformed by responsible citizens. (Grosrichard 1998)

When Gandhi shed his three piece lawyer’s suit and embraced a new role as a political ascetic when he returned to India in 1915, he both embodied and renewed a longstanding and legitimate cultural register of renunciation. With it came a new idea of the person – the nationalist ascetic who purified the body of the nation, and his own conscience, though highly visible and staged exemplary conduct and performance. This motif of moral ‘anti-politics’ became subsequently one of the most legitimate forms of public action in independent India. (see Hansen 1999)

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In our global modernity, self-making is almost invariably concerned with expunging of the past and the embarrassing habits and predilections of one's community. Every ideal of new and reformed selves are always shadowed by the ghosts they are trying to rid themselves of. In their study of migrant communities of Kerala, Caroline and Filippo Osella demonstrate this process of purging of older selves (Osella & Osella, 2000). Hylton White's analysis of the painstaking reconstruction and failure of Zulu rituals in the face of the disintegration of the kin and authority structures that used to give them meaning and efficacy shows the painful impossibility of older ideals of selfhood. (White 2002)

The idea of self-improvement, acquiring purer, more modern, more interiorized and more reflexive modalities of belief, religious practice, political aspiration and cultural sensibility, is probably one of the most powerful effects of modernity across the world. What Taylor calls modern imaginaries (Taylor 2004) were transmitted by modern education, nationalism, novels, films and intense circulation of stories, images and other narratives frames. These imaginaries impel millions of people across the world to look ahead, to shed their sense of the past and its unreflexive practices. Instead they re-invent their history and their own selves in a new and *aufgehoben* manner – in order to become modern individuals or communities guided not by unreflexive custom but by well-defined and purified cultural, moral or religious principles.

The ideals of convictions and the truth procedures they entail – as an ethics of sincerity or an ethics of consequence – may not be universal modes of being *in toto* but they have become something close to global ideals of proper modern personhood, or a global grammar of interiority.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the practices, discourses and self-perceptions among social and political activists across the world. 'The activist' is of course an entirely modern type of person, someone who in NGOs, social movements, advocacy, newspaper columns and 'civil society' is the enunciator and public performer of ideals of selfhood, interiority and conviction across the world. By virtue of his/her public and highly visible life activists are often screens for the projection of outrage, *schadenfreude*, and admiration. I can think of no better way of illustrating my argument regarding modern conviction as a global grammar of interiority than to relate the stories of three men of conviction.

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I will present stories of three individuals I got to know really well over years of fieldwork in both India and South Africa – all men of conviction who found themselves torn between multiple dimensions in their lives. In all cases the most fundamental contradiction was split between the desiring self and the principled self. They all struggled to make these two dimensions meet, and they all struggled with feelings of betrayal by the movement to which they had bonded themselves.

Rafiq

Rafiq was a big man in every way – imposing, tall, big smile, big presence. He grew up in the prosperous Gujarati Muslim world in South Africa, a world intensely inter-connected through dense webs of intermarriage of families, of business partnerships, and of ethno-religious institutions – such as mosque committees, *jamaat khanas*, mutual aid societies, charities, etc. Rafiq believed in God and he was intensely committed to his own community and to Muslim solidarity across the world. Indifferent to the finer points regarding the exact meaning of certain verses in the Koran, he was a practical man and the center of the big multigenerational household.

His brother Yaqub's involvement in the global Muslim organization Tablighi Jamaat had left a deep mark on the entire household. Tablighis seek to re-convert ordinary Muslims to a more pious and clean life style. It emphasized practice, ethical behavior, sincerity of purpose, care for Muslim brothers and belief and good intentions (*niyah*) of ordinary people more than any virtuoso command of the Koran or even the Hadith.

For Rafiq, these injunctions were in keeping with networks of kin and trust. Rafiq was always willing to perform the more delicate and potentially dangerous tasks, such as organizing security guards for meetings and leading night teams of community volunteers who patrolled the neighborhood to prevent crime and perform 'citizens arrests'. For the latter task, he and his eldest son Shahid, showed up in their 4W4 truck, with combat vests, boots and baseball caps with gold embroidered letters in Arabic saying *La ilaha illa Allah*: there is no deity but God.

Rafiq felt, however, that those who were capable of saying the word, of speaking well and interpreting the scripture, always were accorded more respect. He was often visibly uncomfortable when at dinner, Yaqub would launch into long

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explanations of the correct understanding of a certain Hadith and what consequences it should have for how to live one's life.

The Tablighi discourse of perfect ethical conduct was widely accepted as a form of shared conscience, an unattainable goal, that existed only as a discursive but also uncontested 'truth' that never could be fully domesticated let alone realized in practice – except at a high price. The family accepted, if grudgingly, that Yaqub committed himself to this ideal but Rafiq often made indirect but pointed comments on how expensive it was to keep someone so pious! Rafiq complained about those who thought that 'serving God is more important than looking after their own children'.

This form of radical rhetorical commitment to global Muslim solidarity existed in the family compound literally as an unquestionable commitment that often was difficult to square with the everyday commitments in a family and a community so intensely networked and interconnected that the very distinction between kin and Ummah seems blurred and of little consequence.

Rafiq was torn between the contradictions that were inherent to how convictions were held in his own social world: while forced to submit to the rhetorical and moral force of the Tablighi discourse on the ideal but unattainable Muslim life, he preferred to commit himself to an ethics of sincerity and to provide neighborly service to his own community. Yet he was always in doubt – did he do enough? Should he also embark on conversion drives like Yaqub although he did not speak well and probably could never convince anyone by the force of his words?

Lal

Like many other intelligent and resourceful people of his generation, Lal was forced to live a much more restricted life than he desired. He grew up in a mixed African-Indian area in Durban, mastered some isiZulu and fanagolo, the amalgamated command language used in mines and enterprises in the country. Stuck in a township for Indians and in a lower level administrative job under the tutelage of arrogant and under-qualified white bosses, he decided in the 1970s to devote his energies to reading and political activism.

Lal was repelled by what he saw as corrupt politics in the Indian townships. For Lal, the ANC's Freedom Charter which outlined a future, just and non-racial South Africa was *the* guiding light and a source of dignity, come what may.

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In the 1970s and 1980s Lal began working with a new generation of activists from the Indian elite in Durban. They were much younger than him and had more formal education although Lal by himself had become a well-read man. He found their Marxisante rhetoric off-putting and alien. He found them class conscious and arrogant while he, the working class autodidact, only seemed to fit into their plans by providing a touch of authenticity and mobilizing potential in the township.

He often fantasized about being a real militant, had he had been younger, without family and unfettered. It seemed real and the only adequate response to an ever more violent state. Lal did become involved in finding safe houses for some of the underground militants but never as much as he wanted. One day, the young militant he was looking after explained why they never talked to him about what they did. 'You are a security risk, Lal, you have three kids and a life. You will talk if they turn on the heat.'

On one hand he was proud that he had been involved with his car and his groceries, but also ashamed. Was it because he was too kind and too gregarious that they did not trust him? Was it because he was from a wrong class? Not polished enough, and not ruthless enough? Or did they not trust his convictions?

Many illegal African squatters began to arrive in his neighborhood in the late 1980s. They had no access to schools, water or any official facilities. Lal began a campaign to have them legalized in the neighborhood. Many local Indians were incensed. Why would he take up the cause of these 'darkies'? Why not send them back to their own township? For many locals Lal was a dangerous man, a communist (a label he loved) and an ANC agent whose only aim was to invite as many Africans into the township as possible.

For Lal, non-racialism was a practical thing and he was completely at ease with the mainly uneducated laborers and migrants from the KwaZulu homeland who he organized in work gangs to clear up the bush and beautify the neighborhood. This was Lal's finest hour where he earned local fame, and thrived on the resistance from conservative quarters.

After 1994 things changed dramatically but not in the way he had hoped. Paradoxically, as a committed ANC man he found himself more isolated than ever before. ANC received less than 20% of the votes in the Indian townships, now regarded as sites of untrustworthy conservatism. Lal felt contempt coming from the new breed of African organizers and political figures he now encountered. Well-educated, quick, militant but also skeptical of types like Lal who they dis-

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missed as well-meaning and sincere liberals without proper understanding of what true transformation was about. 'These men have suffered and risked their lives, that is true. But why do they not think that an Indian can be as good an ANC man as them? Why do they have the monopoly on judging who is for and who is against transformation?'

He was embarrassed to find that after a long life spent with living and caring for needy, and often grateful poor, rural Africans, the encounter with an educated African – his equal or superior – generated deeply ambivalent feelings in him such as anxiety, resentment, annoyance. Was he able to appreciate the 'face of the other' when that face had the same contours as his, spoke as he did – not in fanagolo but in good English? Was it perhaps that his love for Africans was based on the fact that to him they were merely representatives of 'the people', of the oppressed?

Lal also found that the Africans he used to work with had changed. They felt entitled and demanded things. Everything came to a head when Lal was involved in organizing a huge celebration of Mandela's 80th birthday in his township to impress and sway Indian opinion. However, the whole extravaganza never achieved that. Most local Indians were too frightened to blend in the crowd of thousands of Africans, and many in the ANC insisted that Africans should be allotted the majority of the seats at the celebration. Instead of local Indians flocking to the event, Lal ended up directing hundreds of busses coming from the African townships. He left the show half way through. 'Maybe I am just getting old', he said, 'but I find these young Zulus very loud. We organized it all but they behaved as if it was their show.'

This was a turning point for Lal. In the last two years of his life he spent more time in the local temple than anywhere else. Not that he was religious, but he found it a nice place to meet old friends. Non-racialism had been a seductive idea, a true utopian 'third' to embrace at a time when most South Africans had been boxed into clumsily administered identity spaces. Non-racialism was a much more difficult proposition now that cultural identity and race had turned from being a predicament into becoming loci of identitarian desire – desires that seem to take the place of non-racialism as a new universal to be embraced and to interiorize in post-apartheid South Africa.

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Anand

Anand was a highly energetic and charismatic local politician and a *swayamsevak* (self-forgetting volunteer) in the family of militant rightwing Hindu organizations in India known as the RSS. From an impoverished and lower caste background, Anand found support and intellectual nourishment in the local *shakha* (branch) where was fed the stable of Hindutva ideology: Muslims raped and abused India and Hindu men must stand up to be strong and manly in order to wash off this stain on Hindu honor.

Physically courageous, Anand became a leader of a new street fighting brigade set up to counter what the movement claimed as an impending 'Muslim domination'. He also discovered a rhetorical talent and soon emerged as the most effective 'mass-leader' and firebrand in his city. He found a new authenticity in his violent self. 'Those years were so intense that I felt that every week was like a normal month. I stepped out of my childhood and became a new person. From then on, I was never afraid.'

Many in the movement saw him as too successful and popular outside the movement. A bitter conflict developed between Anand and the leading men, austere Brahmins from leading families in the city – the 'school teachers', as he called them. He saw them as effete and self-obsessed purists, jealously guarding the movement's inner structures and their own right to pronounce the correct ideology.

In the view of these leading men – many of whom had renounced family life and lived as bachelors with sparse material belongings and devoted all their time to the movement – Anand was an impostor. He had not yet learnt to become identical with the principles of the movement – to sublimate his own self into pure ideological desire – in the way they had mastered. One of them told me that Anand was 'our Amadeus of politics' – the untamed and scandalous political prodigy.

Anand had committed three sins in the eyes of the seniors. He took the Hindu nationalist critique of caste too literally and plunged himself into promotion of marriages across caste and community boundaries. The elders saw this as promoting licentiousness and excessive westernization.

Secondly, he was also accused of being soft on Muslims – a paradoxical charge considering that he made his name beating up Muslims. He had often displayed kindness and lent a sympathetic ear to poor Muslim communities where he had

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gone to ask for votes. His difference with Muslims was purely political and heavily 'Zionist' – a movement he admired greatly: 'I have nothing against their religion. All I want them to understand is that they are citizens of this country and this is the only homeland of the Hindus.' He was a political Hindu, he said, and he saw himself as fighting the political Muslims in the streets.

Finally, he cared for the actual people so much that it cast doubt on his commitment to the true object of love, the Hindu nation, as embodied in the movement. His popularity, *joie de vivre*, his big laugh and love of food and drink were legendary and the stuff of much gossip.

The 'teachers' in the movement, who he once sought as father figures, still refused to recognize him as a man of true conviction. I asked him why he remained with the movement. His reply revealed the tragic core of true conviction: 'The *Sangha parivar* is my family. One does not leave one's family even when there is trouble. I owe everything I am and achieved in life to this movement. Will anyone ever respect me if I leave tomorrow? Can I even respect myself?'

Everybody loves a loser! The moral economy of conviction

In my three examples, the person of conviction is always required to demonstrate his/her consistency in acts of selflessness and sacrifice. Within an ethics of sincerity, the test of conviction lies in the tactics the courage of being yourself, also in adversity. In the ethics of consequence, it is the ability to break norms, to run risks, and to strategize that counts. The latter game is bigger, harder, and more risky; here is not an individual life but the world that is at stake, as Arendt suggests.

The convicted self is often regarded by others as fundamentally acting outside its own self. To adversaries, and even to loved ones, the convicted self appears as something akin to an alien body of ideology and excessive commitment. A force of possession that enable extraordinary deeds, but which also can turn idealistic people into vehicles of evil or excess. In both cases, the convicted self is seen as an intrinsically alien entity that make people go out of themselves. But this is not all. Although the sense of commitment often times felt alien and difficult to themselves, Anand's, Lal's and Rafiq's senses of their own selves and moral worth were so tied to these collectivities that abandoning the cause would be tantamount to a

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form of moral suicide. Giving up or running away was not just cowardly but also existentially impossible. The element of tragedy, betrayal and inevitable failure in these stories points to perhaps the central paradox of *political love* – that it never can be consummated and even less realized. Its realization – building the future nation, full identification and fusion with the masses, divine redemption of some sort – is always thwarted by betrayals of the cause, selfishness, greed and hypocrisy. This logic of betrayal indeed makes it possible to continuously save the cause, the true object of desire, from ever being contaminated by the predictable failure of individuals or even movements. More paradoxically, the very impossibility of political love also re-produces itself through the heroic gesture, a gesture of pure courage, and the Eros of beautiful failure that continues to be of enormous attraction across the world. Such a gesture can lend grandeur to individual lives. It is also structurally similar to the aristocratic ethic of honor and pride, the sovereign and wasteful expenditure of things and life which modern convictions exactly set out to oppose and substitute.

But is this Eros of failure not tantamount to a desire for self-sacrifice? In Bataille's interpretation, sacrifice is premised upon the division of the world into two realms – an ordinary and intelligible world of things, utility and necessity, that is fully mastered by humans; and, a world of intimacy, a realm that reveals 'the invisible brilliance of life that is not a thing' (Ibid. 47), a realm we may call 'the sacred' in its broadest sense. Sacrifice may appear as destruction of useful objects or animals but it actually means an incorporation of mere things into this intimate realm of life, thereby both overcoming and affirming the separation of the sphere of the ordinary from that of life and true intimacy.

Can we not plausibly see the person of conviction as someone who willingly attempts to cross that line into another dimension, where life is more risky, more intense, more lived to the full and where the self is united with the world through a metaphysics of purpose? Maybe we should add to this a calibrated version of Girard's proposition that sacrifice is about expiation of collective sins through the victim that stands for the whole, the surrogate victim. (Girard 1977) The person of conviction may well be looked at not as a victim but as embodying a collective ideal, a *surrogate hero*, an often tragic figure, through which the community relays and projects its own incompleteness, and compensates for its own lack of purpose, lack of consistency, lack of virtue. This surrogate figure of the activist/hero makes his/her own body, emotions and biography into a screen upon which both collec-

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tive virtues and lacks can be projected; and through which risk, Eros and death can be experienced by many different people.

It seems to me that conviction has to be understood through a larger global cultural economy of desire that transcend cultural zones. To hold convictions opens the possibility of giving oneself up to a larger cause, or to the divine, i.e. to be 'owned' by a collectivity, or a community. It means to move from a mere world of intelligible and enumerable things and relations, where one is but a cipher, into a world of immanence and oneness, where every act and gesture is symbolic, never literal and thus never banal, and where even death is glorious and ennobling. This desire seems to me to be the very heart of the political theology of conviction.

Ik heb gezegd.

References

1. For an excellent summary of these insights and a program for further research see Meyer 2006.
2. See also Foucault's *The Uses of Pleasure* (1990) where he shows that although pleasure of all kinds were seen as intrinsic to the cultivation of the senses in the civilized Greek citizen it was never allowed to dominate the capacity for reflection and proper conduct.
3. For a brilliant account of the Spanish Inquisition and its role in creating early modern statecraft, as well as ideas of selves, interiority, culpability and the alterity of the native soul in the Spanish colonies, see Silverblatt 2004.
4. Adam Smith got in trouble with public opinion in Edinburgh when he published an account of his friend David Hume's illness and deathbed which showed that Hume, the atheist, displayed fellow feeling, *joie de vivre* and good humor to his last hours. Many Christians thought it was scandalous to report that Hume was unafraid of death, that he stuck to his convictions and displayed no sign of fearing neither God nor punishment. See for instance George Horne's treatise from 1777, *Letter to Adam Smith on the Life, Death and Philosophy of his Friend David Hume by one of the People called Christian*. Edinburgh: Thoemmes Continuum, 1999. I owe thanks to Peter van Rooden who alerted me to this telling detail in both Smith's and Hume's lives.
5. Maximilien Robespierre, 1793, *Extracts from 'In Defence of the Committee of Public Safety and against Briez'*. Printed in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*. Edited by Slavoj Žižek. 2007. London: Verso, p. 73-79. The literature on the Jacobins and the network of Jacobin clubs across France is extensive. See Higonnet 1998 and Klosko 2003.
6. For an excellent analysis of the actual rhetoric of Osama bin Laden and associates, see Devji 2005.

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