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POLITICS: A NON-EXPRESSIVE DIALECTICS



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I think we can speak [?] today, after the last century, of a classical revolutionary politics. And my thesis is that we are beyond this classic revolutionary politics. Its most important characteristic in my conviction is what I name the expressive dialectics. Certainly, as Slavoj Žižek was saying this morning, political struggle and insurrection, revolution, and so on, are not structural effects – in the classical conception too: they are moments, and we have to grasp the moment, name the circumstances, and so on. but finally, the moment, the political struggle expresses, concentrates, the social contradictions. And it is why an insurrection can be purely singular and universal: purely singular because its a moment, the pure moment, and universal because finally this moment expresses the generality of fundamental contradictions.

In the same way – and it's another part of the expressive dialectics – the revolutionary party, the revolutionary organisation represents the working class. And finally we have the famous sentence of Lenin about the very heart of Marxism: “the masses are divided into classes, classes are represented or expressed by parties, and parties are [hold] by chiefs. So finally we have something which goes from historical action or historical [?] of masses to some proper names. The name of a big chief is the symbolic expression of all the becoming of the political process. Technically we can say that to go from the moment of creativity of masses to a real consideration of contradiction of classes we have to be under the potency of the proper name. And it is why all the political tendencies of the last century are under proper names: Leninism, Stalinism, Trotskyism, Castroism, and so on. And it is why also the question – which was also a question of Slavoj's this morning – the question of leadership, the question of

the place of proper names in the political field today is a very important question. Because this conception of masses, classes, proper names – which is also the conception of the relation between singularity and universality, singularity of proper name and absolute universality of action of masses – is a very strong one. But probably it's saturated, or finished. So my goal today is just to try to open the way for a non-expressive conception of political dialectics, for a conception of political dialectics without probably that sort of becoming-proper-name of the action of masses. And in this new conception, revolutionary politics is not the expression of concentration of social contradictions, it's a new way of thinking and doing collective actions.

In this way, if you want, political process is not an expression, a singular expression, of the objective reality but it is in some sense separated from this reality. The political process is not a process of expression, but a process of separation. Exactly like in the Platonic vision of dialectics, a truth is separated from opinions. Or, also, like we saw this morning, in the Lacanian conception truth is separated from knowledge. It's not a contradiction, it's not a negation, but it's a separation.

So, as you can see, I'm really speaking of a politics of truth, because I am speaking of the possibility – the logical and real possibility – of a politics of separation. In the real field of politics today, which is a sort of destroyed field, or a battlefield without armies, we often oppose a reactionary politics – liberalism and so on – the crucial concept of which in the political field is law and order, which are the protection of potency and richness, and on the other side a revolutionary politics the crucial concept of which is collective desire, the desire for a new world of peace, justice, and so on. And the expressive dialectics today is the relation between the conservative dimension of the law and the creative

dimension of desire. We have to show [?] that in the field of the non-expressive dialectics the real political truth is beyond this opposition, beyond the opposition of law and desire, or beyond the identity of law and desire.

I begin from a very distant point after this introduction. In fact I begin from a logical joke. Suppose you have a dish, generally full of delicious fruits: apples, pears, strawberries, plums and so on. You can see it's the beginning of a real desire, that sort of dish...after my fish and chips of today! But one day, one day, we don't know why, the dish is completely changed. We find in it apples, pears, strawberries and plums and so on, but also, like a vile mixture, stones, snails, pieces of dried mud, dead frogs, and prickles. And you can see, it's the beginning of a demand for order: immediate separation of what is good and what is disgusting. The problem here is the problem of classification. And it's the real beginning of my logical joke. What are exactly the correct parts of the contents of the dish after the metamorphosis in question.

Consider the contents of the dish as a set, a pure set. It's clear that the elements of this set, the elements of this set, the elements of the contents of the dish, are clearly apples, strawberries, prickles, dried mud, dead frogs, and so on. No problem. But what are the parts of the dish; or, if you want, the subsets of the set which is the contents of the dish? On one side, we have some parts which have a clear name. Take for example the part of the dish all the strawberries: it's a part of the dish, all the strawberries, its a clear part. You can also take a part of the dish all the dead frogs. It's a disgusting part, but it's a part, and a part which has a clear name. You can also have a bigger part, a more general part, for example all the fruits: strawberries, pears and so on. It's also a part that has a clear name. We can say that sort of part is asso-

ciated in language with a clear predicate: it's, if you want, a predicative part. But on the other side, you have some very strange multiplicities. What can we say about a part composed of two apples, three prickles, one dead frog, one strawberry and seven pieces of dried mud? Certainly it's a part of the contents of the dish. But certainly too it's a part without a name, without a clear name. You can have a list of the elements of this sort of part, of elements of that sort of subset, you can say there is something and something and something...but you cannot have a synthetic name, only enumeration and not a synthetic and clear name. Generally speaking, a law – we can name law – a law is the prescription of reasonable order in that sort of situation, when you have that sort of dish. A law is a decision to accept as really existing only some parts of the dish of collective life. Naturally the not easy decision is to accept only the parts which have a clear name: strawberries, pears, fruit, prickles, mud; and to prohibit[?] the parts which have no name at all, like the mixture of apples, prickles and dead frogs. So the law is always saying not only what is permitted and what is forbidden, but in fact what exists under a clear name and which is normal, and what is unnameable and so doesn't really exist. That is, an abnormal part of the practical totality. And it's a very important point to remark that finally a law is always a decision about existence. And, for example, the outbursts in Paris and so on, are also a question of existence, and not really a question of interdiction, prohibition and so on.

It's a question that a certain part of the collective totality does not exist properly in the legal conception. The question of the law is finally not only a juridical and a classical question, but an ontological one: it's a question about existence. And it's finally a question of relation between language and things, and their existence which is constructed from the relation between words and things, to speak like Foucault. Finally, in the field of the law, there exists

only what has a clear description. The problem is on the side of desire now. Because we can certainly say that desire is always desire of what does not exist in this sense. Desire is the search for something which is beyond the normality of the law. The real object of true desire is always something like an apple which is also a prickle. That is the real object of a true desire; we can say that true desire is always the desire for a monster. And why? because desire is affirmation of the pure singularity across and beyond normality.

There is a very clear mathematical example of this relation between desire and law, between different forms of existence, which is really interesting. Don't be afraid, it's very simple. I think mathematics is very often something which is linked to terror. And I am always speaking from a non-terrorist conception of mathematics... Suppose that we are in the theory of sets – we have a theory of the pure multiplicity – and suppose we consider one set, no matter what set; a multiplicity absolutely ordinary. The interesting thing is that with some technical means we can formalise the idea of a subset of this set which has a clear name. So the question of the relation between existence and clear name has a possible formalisation in the field of the mathematical theory of sets. Precisely, to have a clear name is to be defined by one clear formula. It was an invention of the greatest logician of the last century, Kurt Gödel. He named that sort of subset a constructible subset; a constructible subset of a set is a set which has a clear description. And generally speaking we name constructible set a set which is a constructible subset of another set.

So, we have here the possibility of what I name a *great law*. What is a great law? A great law is a law of laws, if you want: the law of what is really the possibility of a law. And we have a sort of mathematical example of what is that sort of law, which is not only a

law of things or subjects, but a law for laws. The great law takes the form of an axiom, the name of which is the axiom of constructibility and which is very simple. This axiom is: all sets are constructible. You know that is a decision about existence: you decide that exist only sets that are constructible, and you have as a simple formula a simple decision about existence. All sets are constructible, that is the law of laws. And this is really a possibility. You can decide that all sets are constructible. Why? Because all mathematical theorems which can be demonstrated in the general theory of sets can also be demonstrated in the field of constructible sets. So all that is true of sets in general is in fact true for only constructible sets. So – and it's very interesting about the question, the general question of the law – we can decide that all sets are constructible, or if you like that all multiplicity is under the law, and we lose nothing: all that is true in general is true with the restriction to constructible sets. If you lose nothing, if the field of truth is the same under the axiom of constructibility, we can say something like: the law is not a restriction of life and thinking; under the law, the liberty of living and thinking is the same. And the mathematical model of that is that we don't lose anything when we have the affirmation that all sets are constructible, that is to say all parts of sets are constructible, that is to say finally all parts have a clear definition. And as we have a general classification of parts, a rational classification of parts; classification of society if you want – without any loss of truth.

At this point there is a very interesting fact, a pure fact. Practically no mathematician admits the axiom of constructibility. It's a beautiful order, in fact, it's a beautiful world: all is constructible. But this beautiful order does not stimulate the desire of a mathematician, as conservative as he might be. And why? Because the desire of the mathematician is to go beyond the clear order of nomination and constructibility. The desire of the math-

ematician is also the desire for a mathematical monster. They want a law, certainly – difficult to do mathematics without laws – they want a law but the desire to find some new mathematical monster is beyond this law.

And on this point, modern mathematics and classical theology say the same thing. You probably know the famous text of Saint Paul in Romans 7. the direct correlation of law and desire is here under the name of sin. Sin is the name of the correlation between law and desire. I quote: “If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said you shall not covet”. Sin is that dimension of desire which finds its object beyond the prescription of the law and after the prescription of the law. That is, finally, to find the object which is without name.

The mathematical example is very striking. After Gödel, the definition of constructible sets, and the refusal of the axiom of constructibility by the majority of mathematicians, the question of the mathematician’s desire becomes: how can I find a non-constructible set? And you see the difficulty, which is of great political consequence. The difficulty is, how can we find some mathematical object without clear description of it, without name, without place in the classification: how to find an object the characteristic of which is to have no name, to not be constructible, and so on. And the very complex and elegant solution was found in the sixties by Paul Cohen. He found an elegant solution to name, to identify, a set which is not constructible, which has no name, which has no place in the great classification of predicates, a set which is without specific predicate. It was a great victory of desire against law, in the field of law itself, the mathematical field. And like many things, many victories of this type, it was in the sixties. And Paul Cohen gives the nonconstructible sets a very beautiful

name: generic sets. And the invention of generic sets is something in the revolutionary actions of the sixties.

You know that Marx names 'generic humanity' humanity in the movement of its proper emancipation; and 'proletariat', the name 'proletariat' is the name of the possibility of generic humanity in an affirmative form. 'Generic' names in Marx the becoming of the universality of human beings, and the proletarian historical function is to deliver the generic form of the human being. So in Marx political truth is on the side of genericity, and never on the side of particularity. It's formally a matter of desire, creation, invention, and not a matter of law, necessity and conservation. So, Cohen – like Marx, finally – was saying to us that the pure universality of multiplicity, of sets, is not on the side of correct definition, of clear description, but on the [?] of non-constructibility. The truth of sets is generic.

We have now to say something about the political consequences of all that. The field of politics is always in concrete situations the dialectical field of law and constructibility on one side, desire and genericity on the other side. But this is not a political division. The field is the field where we find law and constructibility, desire and genericity. But there are never people who are in favour of desire against people who are in favour of law. The political struggle is not directly the struggle between genericity and constructibility. This vision is purely formal. In fact we have compositions, complex compositions between law, order, desire, genericity, constructibility. For example, fascism is not at all on the side of pure law. Fascism, as Slavoj Žižek was saying, is on the side of meaning: to give meaning to the situation, to give classification. But fascism is in fact the complete destruction of the law, as empirical studies are saying, in favour of a special conception of desire, which is not at all a desire of the generic, but on the contrary a

desire for a completely particular object. This object, which is national, racial, and so on, is neither constructible nor generic. It is only the negation of some other objects, the destruction of these others. So there is finally – and it's a spatial composition – there is finally in fascism the mythic desire of an object the very essence of which is death. And the real of fascism is something like a law of death, which is the result of a special composition of genericity and constructibility. Significantly, in the classical conception, revolutionary vision is not at all on the side of pure desire, because the contents of revolutionary desire is the realisation of generic humanity, which is in fact the end of the separate relation between law and desire. So we can say that the goal, in that case, is something like the fusion of law and desire in something that is the creative affirmation of humanity as such. We can say that that sort of vision is a law of life. So the classical contradiction between fascism and the classical revolutionary conception proposes to us two compositions, two different compositions between genericity and constructibility, the law of death on one side and the law of life on the other side.

What we have today is in fact two great paradigms of the dialectical relation between law and desire; its a description of our situation. The first one is the idea of the unity of law and desire, by the strict imitation of the legality of desire as such, by the delimitation of correct desire. In fact, it is the axiom of constructibility. And we are today, under the axiom of constructibility: you restrain existing desires to the clear nomination of normal desires. Normal desires are very good indeed. And the reactionary conception today is the reactionary conception of desire itself, and not the pure opposition, the oppressive opposition between law and desire. The key concept is not law against desire. It is on the contrary the dictatorship of normal desires – with a very open conception of normal, but not so big as we think sometimes. You

can suppose, for example, that representative democracy is the normal desire of all people, of all the people in the world: that is, strictly speaking, a constructible conception of political desire: Only one type of political figure is admitted as a constructible subset of all the political possibilities. And, for example, you can do a terrible war to impose this form of state on everybody. No matter of law, as you can see, in fact. Because you have a great disorder. It's no matter in Iraq of law and order, it's a question of blood and total disorder. But it's a constructible choice, it's a constructible choice. Because we have to impose the construction of a supposed completely clear political name everywhere.

This the first position. The second position is the idea of desire as a search beyond the law for something illegal but generic. It's the idea that political universality is always the process of a new conception, a new composition, of social reality – the change of the dish, if you want, the complete change of the dish. So we have a new composition, and new composition is really the objective of political change: black with white, male and female, different nationalities, rich and poor, and so on. All that can go beyond clear names and separations. It's a fighting process which creates something generic. So the second conception is that political process is always the local creation of something which is generic. Like Cohen, finally: to find or to create a part of the totality of life which is generic.

In that case, there is also something like a dictatorship which is what Rousseau named the despotism of liberty, but which these days is much more the despotism of equality; that is, against the idea of normal desires, the fighting idea of a desire which always affirms as existing what is without name. Because it is the common part, the generic part of our historical existence. Affirmation of existence of what is without name as the generic

part of our historical existence: that is probably the revolutionary conception *today*, with the possibility that that sort of transformation would be a local one, and not always a general one or a total one. And, as you can see, its not at all desire against law. The formula is *generic will against normal desires*. And I agree completely with Slavoj Zizek, who this morning was saying that the question of *volonté generale* is the central question of politics today. I propose just a change of the adjective, a change of name: not general will but generic will, against normal desires.

Probably the third paradigm, which is not completely constituted, is a paradigm which finds the constructible part of the generic will. because we know that the pure opposition of generic will against normal desire is something which is an idea. A very strong idea, but with difficulty in the real process. To have a real process of generic will against normal desires we have to find the constructible part of the generic will today. Because we cannot find a generic part without being completely clear about what is a constructible part. There is a correlation between the definition today of what is constructible and the possibility to create generic will.

And so , my conclusion will not be completely a political one. But as often when I am in the sense of the possibility, the political possibility, my conclusion will be a poetic one, and with the great American poet Wallace Stevens. Simon Critchley wrote recently a beautiful book about Wallace Stevens, the title of which is *Things Merely Are*. *Things Merely Are*, it's a typically poetical affirmation, *Things Merely Are*, and a typically nonpolitical affirmation. Because in the political field things not "merely are" – generally things non-are. And one poem of Wallace Stevens we can find this sentence: "the final belief must be in a fiction." And in fact I think the most difficult problem today is the problem of a new fic-

tion. The most important political problem is the problem of a new fiction. We have to distinguish between fiction and ideology. Because generally speaking ideology is something which isn't coupled with science, or with truth or with real, reality. But as we know from Lacan and from before, the truth itself is in a structure of fiction. The process of truth is also the process of a new fiction. And so to find the new great fiction is the possibility to have a final belief, political belief.

And in fact, when the world is dull and confusing, as it is today, we have to sustain our final belief by a magnificent fiction. The problem of the young men of the cities, in Paris, was the lack of fiction. It's not a social problem at all, but a lack of great fiction to have real belief. So, the final belief in generic truths, the final possibility to oppose generic will to normal desires, that sort of possibility and the final belief in that sort of possibility, in generic truths, has to be our new fiction. And probably the difficulty today is that we have to find a great fiction without proper name. It's my conviction, I cannot demonstrate exactly this point. The question of leadership and so on: we have probably to find a fiction which is not the great fiction of the moment, the historical moment of masses under a proper name, and the possibility to go across the contradiction of classes under the proper name. And it is not the proper name which is the fiction itself, but in the last century all great fictional dispositions in the political field have been with proper names. The problem is today, I think, not to renounce to fiction – because without great fiction we have not final belief and we have not great politics – but probably to have fiction without proper names. And so, another disposition between masses, classes, parties, and so on. So, another composition of the political field: because a great fiction is always something like the name of a new composition of the political field in itself. And the great fiction of communism, finally, the great fic-

tion which goes from masses to proper names by contradiction of classes, is really a composition, a spatial composition of the political field, is the classical revolutionary composition of the political field. And so we have to find a new fiction, to find our final belief in local possibility of finding something generic.

In the same poem Wallace Stevens writes also – he is speaking about fiction, about final belief which is a fiction, and he writes: “It is possible, possible, possible, it must be possible.” It is our problem today. It must be possible. It’s a question probably of a new form of courage. We have to create the real possibility of our fiction, certainly. Create the real possibility of our fiction which is a generic fiction in a new form, the new localisation is probably a question of a new political courage. The question of finding the fiction is a question of justice and hope, of representation finally. But the question of the possibility of fiction is the question of courage. And Courage is the name of something which is not reducible either to law or desire. Courage is the name for subjectivity which is irreducible to the dialectics of law and desire in its proper form. And its exactly the place of political action today – not political theory, not political conception, political representation, but political action as such – is exactly something which irreducible to law and to desire, creates the place, the local place, for something generic, for something like the generic will. And, about this place, we have to say, Like Stevens, it’s possible, possible, possible, it must be possible. Maybe. We hope, we have to hope that: it must be possible to find the possibility of our new fiction.