

Affirmative Dialectics: from Logic to Anthropology

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The fundamental problem in the philosophical field today is to find something like a new logic. We cannot begin by some considerations about politics, life, creation or action. We must first describe a new logic, or more precisely, a new dialectics. This is the way of Plato, but after all, it is also the way Karl Marx proposed. The work of Marx is not first a new historical vision, a new theory of class struggle, and so on, but from its very beginning a new general logic in the wake of Hegelian dialectics. Marx was perhaps the first, maybe after Plato, to create an explicit relation between revolutionary politics and a new dialectical framework. We have the same problem today. To be sure, we have to rectify something after two centuries of successes and failures in revolutionary politics, and, in particular, after the failure of the State-form of socialism. But we also have to find a new logic, a new philosophical proposition adequate to all forms of creative novelty. Thus the question of dialectical and of non-dialectical relations is a pressing difficulty. If you want, our problem is the problem of negativity.

When the logical framework of political action is of the classical dialectical type, what is fundamental is negation. The development of the political struggle is fundamentally something like ‘revolt against’, ‘opposition to’, ‘negation of’, and the newness – the creation

of the new State, or the creation of the new law – is always a result of the process of negation. This is the Hegelian framework; you have a relation between affirmation and negation, construction and negation, in which the real principle of movement, and the real principle of creation, is negation. And so the very definition of the revolutionary class is to be against the present State or against the present law in the precise sense that revolutionary consciousness, as Vladimir Lenin would say, is basically the consciousness that one stands in a relation of negation to the existing order.

This vision as such cannot be sustained today. We are living through a sort of crisis of the trust in the power of negativity, and we know two forms of this crisis. Theodor Adorno thinks that the classical Hegelian dialectics was too affirmative, too submitted to the potency of the Totality and of the One. He proposes a sort of hyper-negativity, the name of which is 'Negative Dialectics'. We know today that in this way, we have nothing else but an ethics of compassion, a vision where the hero of our consciousness is the suffering human body, the pure victim, and we know also that this moralism is perfectly adequate to capitalist domination under the mask of democracy. On the other side, Antonio Negri, but also Louis Althusser, thinks that Hegelian dialectics was too negative, too subjective and too indifferent to the absolute potency of Nature, of Life, of the movement of History. They find in Spinoza a model of philosophy which is finally without negation. We know today that in this way, we have an accepting of the dominant order, through the conviction that this order is full of newness and creativity, and that finally modern capitalism is the immediate strength which works, beyond the empire, in the direction of a sort of communism.

What I try to do in all of my work is propose a new dialectical framework which is not a return to the young Karl Marx or to Georg F. W. Hegel, but that is neither the negative

dialectics of Adorno, which is like the aesthetics of human rights, nor the affirmative construction of Negri, which destroys all forms of dialecticity and is like a Nietzschean ‘Gay Science’ of History. I think the problem today is to find a way of reversing the classical dialectical logic inside itself so that the affirmation, or the positive proposition, comes before the negation instead of after it. In some sense, my attempt is to find a dialectical framework where something or the future comes before the negative present. I’m not suggesting the suppression of the relation between affirmation and negation – certainly revolt and class struggle remain essential – and I’m not suggesting a pacifistic direction or anything like that. The question is not whether we need to struggle or oppose, but concerns more precisely the relation between negation and affirmation. So when I say that there is something non-dialectical, whether with regard to St. Paul or to the field of concrete political analysis, formally it’s the same idea. We have to try to understand exactly the conditions under which we may still have anything like the possibility of concrete negation. I believe this can only really be realized in the field of primitive affirmation, through something that is primitively affirmative and not negative. It’s a question of event and subject, in my terminology.

Ultimately, I am saying something very simple. I am saying first that to open a new situation, a new possibility, we have to have something like a new creativity of time and a new creativity of the situation, something that is really an opening. I name this opening ‘event’. What is an event? An event is simply that which interrupts the law, the rules, the structure of the situation, and creates a new possibility. So an event is not initially the creation of a new situation. It is the creation of a new possibility, which is not the same thing. In fact, the event takes place in a situation that remains the same, but this same situation is inside the new possibility. For example, for Paul the event is the resurrection of Christ, and this event does not directly change anything in the Roman Empire. So the general situation, which is

the Roman Empire, remains the same, but inside the situation there is the opening of a new possibility by the event. In the political field it is the same. In Paris, May 1968 for instance, there is no real change in the general situation of the State: Charles De Gaulle remained in power and the government was still functional with its police and so on, but there was an opening of a new possibility, and this is what I call an event. After that, there is the possibility of the materialization of the consequences of this new possibility, and the elaboration of these consequences is the creation of a new subjective body. A new subjective body is the realization of the possibility that is opened by the event in a concrete form, and which develops some consequences of the new possibility. Naturally, among these consequences there are different forms of negation – struggle, revolt, a new possibility to be against something, destruction of some part of the law, and so on – but these forms of negation are consequences of the birth of the new subjectivity, and not the other way around; it is not the new subjectivity that is a consequence of the negation. So there is something really non-dialectical – in the sense of Hegel and Marx — about this logic, because we do not start with the creativity of negation as such, even if the site of negativity is certainly included in the consequences of something which is affirmative.

I can here return many years back to my book about the Apostle Paul. This book was written ultimately to propose a clear example of this new logic, that is, a new logic for all truth procedures, and thus for those in the political field as well. Paul offers a very clear example of how to think the relation between an event and a new subjectivity—this was my main point. Paul provides a new, very acute perspective on how this logic operates in the field of law, and specifically in the relation of the new subject to the old law. In a very explicit manner, Paul explains that when you have an event that is really the creation of a new possibility in the situation, one must first create a new body and affirm a new subjectivity

before all negation and all negative consequences. The first thing is to create, to affirm the new subjectivity. What, then, is at the very beginning of the new subjectivity and of the new subjective body? It is the group of people who affirm that there is really a new possibility—they affirm the affirmation. In the case of the Christianity, they affirm the resurrection. After that there are a lot of practical and symbolic consequences in all situations. But what is interesting in the example of Paul is that the very beginning of something new is always something like a pure affirmation of the new possibility as such. There is a resurrection; you have to affirm that! And when you affirm the resurrection, and you organize that sort of affirmation – because affirmation is with others and in the direction of others – you create something absolutely new, not in the form of a negation of what exists, but in the form of the newness inside what exists. And so there is no longer negation on the one hand and affirmation on the other. There is rather affirmation and division, or the creation that grounds the independence of new subject from within the situation of the old. This is the general orientation of the new logic.

In this orientation, we can propose a new examination of all the old words in some field of knowledge or action. As an exercise, I propose to discuss the word ‘democracy’. Today, democracy is really the common term of all the ideological dispositions of the imperialist States, of pretty much all the reactionary States, in fact. Therefore we must declare a first rupture by saying that we don’t accept their ideological line, which ultimately amounts to the idea that one can’t resist their ‘democracy’ without being a terrorist, an ally in despotism, and so forth. But this means we are in a situation wherein we have to clarify for ourselves not only the content of the concept but also whether we want to use the word. Is there today a possible good use of the word ‘democracy’? That is my subjective question. It is not exactly a theoretical one. Why? Because I can always name ‘democracy’ something else. There can

be both good and bad uses of the word democracy today; and there is probably something really confusing in the use of the word itself because, generally speaking, it is immediately understood in terms of its present meaning, which is basically the meaning given to it by all the reactionary forces in the world today.

I have decided ultimately to keep the word, 'democracy'. It's generally a good thing to keep the word, because there is something problematic about leftists saying, 'I am not interested in 'democracy' at all, because it has become practically meaningless'. But it is true that when you talk about democracy you are always participating on the terrain of the common ideology. The situation is difficult because we have to criticize the actual 'democracies' in one sense and in a different sense we have to criticize the political propaganda made today about the term 'democracy'. If we do not do this we are paralyzed. In this case we would be saying 'yes, we are in a democracy, but democracy can do something else' and we would ultimately be in a defensive position. And this is the opposite of my conception, because my position is to begin by affirmation, not at all by a defensive position. So, if we keep the word, we must divide the signification of the word classically and differentiate between good democracy and bad democracy, between the reactionary conception of democracy and the progressive conception of democracy. But what is the basis of that division? In classical Marxism, there is a clear basis upon which to divide everything and we divide according to the class distinction. We can distinguish popular democracy from bourgeois democracy, or perhaps, to be more contemporary, from yuppie democracy. The possibility of that sort of division is also the possibility of thinking democracy as something other than a form of State. It is a distinction not only between popular democracy and yuppie democracy, but between true democracy and democracy as a form of State, as a form of oppressive State, as a class State. This strict duality, however, is not convincing in the framework of a new dialectical

thinking; it's too easy to determine negatively the popular democracy as being everything the state democracy is not.

To escape the game of negation and negation of negation, I now present three understandings of democracy—not a division in two, but in three. That is always my trick. When I am in a difficulty with a division in two, I create a division in three, and that's why, generally, as Giorgio Agamben was the first to remark, I have finally, for every problem, four terms. Hegel has three terms, because after the negation and the negation of negation, he has the totality of the process, the becoming of the absolute knowledge as a third term, but for me, after two different affirmations, the conservative one and the affirmation of the new possibility, I have two different negations. It's because the conservative negation of novelty by the reaction is not the same as the negative part, against the conservative position, of the new affirmation.

I give the three primitive terms in the question of democracy. First there is democracy as a form of State, which is really democracy in its commonplace meaning – that is, representative democracy or the parliamentary ideology. Secondly, there is democracy understood as movement or a 'democracy of places', which is not democracy directly in the political sense, but perhaps more in the historical sense. So when democracy takes place, it is democracy in the form of an event. This is the sense of democracy in the work of Jacques Rancière, for example. For Rancière, as for me, democracy is the activation of the principle of equality. When the principle of equality is really active, you have some version of our understanding of democracy: that is, democracy as the irruption of collective equality in a concrete form, which can be protest or insurrection or popular assembly or any other form in which equality is effectively active.

This understanding itself, then, has many forms, but we can perfectly understand precisely what this form of democracy is, and it's in fact a recurrent form of revolutionary democracy. That said, it is much more a form of a sudden emergence in history, and ultimately of the event, than in the form of the consequences of the event or of the creation of the new political body. As such even if the moment of revolutionary rupture is a true meaning of democracy, it is not exactly the political concept of that meaning. I think it's much more a historical concept of democracy, that is to say, a concept that is in relation to the event, and so we have to find a third sense of democracy, which is properly the democracy of the determination of the new political subject as such. This is my ultimate conception. Democracy for me is another name for the elaboration of the consequences of collective action and for determining the new political subject.

Finally, we have four terms: 'classical representative democracy', which is a form of State-power; 'mass-democracy' which is of a historical nature; democracy as a political subject; and finally the process of progressive vanishing of the State, which is the historical and negative inscription of politics in History, under the name of communism. So we substitute the clear classical opposition between the dominant false democracy and the true popular democracy for a sort of complex, with three places and three processes: State, Revolutionary Event, and Politics & the affirmation of peoples' access to politics outside the State, negation of this access by the State, and victory of the political organization of people. As a totalization of the complete complex, a point of communism by the concrete results or all that, results which are proofs of the weakness of the State, and finally of the possibility of its vanishing.

Another sample is precisely the relationship between politics and power. Classically, the goal of political action is to seize power, to destroy the state machinery of the enemies. The name of all that is a master name of all political classicism: revolution. Today, at the beginning of constitution, at the beginning of a new subjective body, it is not possible to be inside the State or more generally to aim for power. The word ‘revolution’ cannot be our master name, so we have to be entirely outside the State power, although the State is always in the field of political questions and in the space of action. If our political subjectivity is not inside the State, if to the contrary it is on the outside, the State is nonetheless in the field of our action. To take a concrete example from my direct experience, if we have to do something about workers who are without papers, say the African immigrants, and we want to organize and to change things in this field, we will quickly find that the State is in our space. We will have to confront new laws and decisions of the State, and we will have to create something that will be face to face with the State—not inside the State, but face to face with it. So, we will have a ‘discussion’ with the State, or we will organize various forms of disruption. In any case, we will have to prescribe something about the State from outside. We will have to prescribe something that establishes a relation with the State. And the big difficulty is to maintain the possibility of being outside while prescribing something that concerns the inside. There is then a sort of topological difficulty in the development of politics, namely, the relation between the outside and the inside, because the State is always inviting you inside and asking that you not be outside.

I have had many very concrete experiences of this. For instance, I’ll go with some workers to discuss matters with some minister or other because the State refuses their ‘regularization’, and always this State representative will ask, ‘who are you?’ and we always answer, ‘we are a political organization with people’, and the reply is always, ‘okay, but who are you?!’ The

problem is simple: to be somebody is to be inside the State, otherwise you cannot be heard at all. So there are two possible outcomes. Either finally there is a discussion and some political results or else there is no room for discussion because we are nobody. It is once more the precise question of affirmation: how can we be somebody without being on the inside? We must affirm our existence, our principles, our action, always from outside.

I know that some critics of my thinking who also want to represent possibilities of a complete transformation of our situation object that I am too 'outside' this process, that I'm ultimately a 'prophet' and not really an active player in the immanent and concrete world. I completely disagree with this sort of objection because it forgets in its theoretical analysis of global society the real logic of prescription and finally the necessity of a new conception of affirmative dialectics. Without the French revolution, without the great revolt of workers in France, without the real and concrete movement of the Parisian proletariat, Marx certainly would never have fathomed this concept of proletariat. The movement goes not from the concept of proletariat to the proletarian movement. The real becoming goes from the revolt of workers to the new proposition. So finally the true discussion is not at all about the concrete analysis of global society, but really about our relation to the State. The real question is whether to be outside or inside the State. The fundamental idea is: to be in the new affirmative dialectical framework, you must be outside the State, because inside the State you are precisely in the negative figure of opposition. And so, once more, the negativity, the appearance of negativity, comes first.

Furthermore, I want to insist on the fact that the new logical framework is not only a vision of politics, or even a vision of some particular practices. It prescribes, much more generally, a sort of anthropology. First, I think we are animals, I speak of human animals and living

bodies, and by contrast to all classical humanism I put in our definition of animals a lot of things. Ultimately, it encompasses all of our concrete existence as such, without anything else and without any supplement, and I really think that capitalist anthropology is the conviction that, fundamentally, humanity is nothing else but self-interested animals. It's a very important point. I think we have to do some propaganda on this point. Modern capitalism is always speaking of human rights, democracy, freedom and so on, but in fact we can see concretely that under all these names we find nothing else but human animals with interests, who have to be happy with products, and in its eyes the subject is something like animals-in-front-of-the-market. This is really its definition of the human. We have a hierarchy at the bottom of which are the poor, who are before the market but without means, and at the top of which are the rich, who are also before the market but who have far greater means, and the protection of all this is really nothing else but capitalist anthropology. The possibility to be something else than animals in this sense is really the becoming subject of a human animal; it is by the incorporation of a new body, which is something else than being in front of the market, that you become something like a subject. 'Infinite' is another name for this process, because what we have in this kind of incorporation is an affirmation of a new possibility with infinite consequences. The new possibility has infinite consequences; this is always the case. So, we can say that human rights, rights that are the subject's rights, are in fact the rights of the infinite. Jean-François Lyotard has for the first time wrote this formula in his most important book, *Le Différend*, and I assume this point.

What is finally the anthropological question though? I propose to say that this question is: what exactly is the singularity of mankind, of human beings? We know that, today, there exists a species of human animals defined by their inclusion in the global market, and, in contrast, we can name 'humanity' the capacity of becoming the subject to an event, to

something that happens. The capacity of accepting the possibility of an incorporation into a new subjective body; the capacity of drawing its practical consequences in the situation of incorporation which itself is the becoming of the new subject. In the becoming of the subject, beyond the support of all that which is one or some human animals, there is something infinite, a new creation of something infinite, and the name of this infinite something is for me: truth. So we can say that the incorporation of the subject is the incorporation of some human animals into something like the process of truth. And that is the global field of what we can name humanity or human beings, in the context of affirmative dialectics. I agree ultimately with the young Marx on one point: ‘only in the successive creation of new forms of subjects is there something like a generic humanity, because generic humanity is infinite humanity, it’s the same thing, and the human animal in front of the market is not at all generic, it is absolutely particular’.

All that is like a new hypothesis about the subject, and it’s also a new hypothesis about human life, about what it means for humans to live. In my book *Logics of Worlds* I oppose human rights in their ordinary meaning to the rights of the infinite by opposing today’s ‘democratic materialism’ to the project of ‘dialectical materialism’, which is a possible name for affirmative dialectics. What makes these forms of materialism antithetical are their respective understanding of human life: either there is nothing but languages and bodies, or else there is a third term, something like the production of ‘truths’ that cut through the hegemony of our animal existence. The title of the conclusion of *Logics of Worlds* is: ‘What is it to Live?’ and this is clearly the final question of anthropology. In fact, there are two completely different conceptions of human life. The first reduces human life to common animal life: satisfaction of all natural desires, happiness, security, and so on. The second one is what we are speaking of here: human life as identified with the incorporation into a truth-

body. So, a human being is properly 'living' only when he or she is the agent of a passage from particularity to universality, from local process to genericity, from a singular world to an eternal truth.

All these passages work under a new Idea, which is, for a concrete individual, the mediation between his or her practical singularity and the common or generic relationship to universality. For example, in politics, the name for this Idea, which is the mediation between the concrete situation of political action and a form of eternal truth is: communism. Maybe this conception is a bit of a heroic one? We know that many philosophers affirm that the time of heroism is passed, but maybe Althusser was right to affirm that philosophy has no history. The fact that an idea is old fashioned is not, for the philosopher, an objection against this idea. In any case, even if this conception is a bit a heroic one, I affirm before you: it's mine, and certainly I am too old to change on this point.