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BEYOND METAPHYSICAL REALISM
AN INTERVIEW WITH GIANNI VATTIMO

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Krisis: In your book Hermeneutic Communism, you argue that being a metaphysical realist implies a conservative political attitude, being in favour of liberal capitalism and what you call 'framed democracy', while being a hermeneutic (or nihilist) implies being in favour of political change. This is quite a bold distinction, because on one side there have been some metaphysical realists that have had progressive political attitudes such as members of the Vienna circle or Noam Chomsky, the latter of whom you quote several times in your book, while on the other side there have been hermeneutical philosophers who have been reactionaries or conservatives, such as Heidegger and Gadamer. Richard Rorty, another hermeneutician whom you also discuss in your book, may have been a thinker on the left, but one would hesitate to call him a communist. How would you defend the distinction against these counterexamples?

Vattimo: On the side of analytical philosophy I don't see many progressive political attitudes. Traditionally, philosophical departments in the US and Great Britain were very scientific, with a one-sided focus on logic and epistemology. Nobody was really interested in a theme like ideology, or other continental themes. Consequently, social criticism was not implied

by their philosophy, which is why there were not a lot of philosophers intervening in politics.

Of course, there have been examples of analytical philosophers with a progressive political attitude. Bertrand Russell, for instance, and indeed Noam Chomsky. But I never saw a strong connection between their philosophical position and their political attitude. Wittgenstein is another good example. I recently read some biographies of him that show that in the 1930s he was very much drawn to communism, and wanted to go to the Soviet Union. But his philosophy was, in the first phase, very scientific, while the later Wittgenstein's philosophy is an analysis of everyday language, which again involves an acceptance of what is there in our vocabulary, i.e. the grammar of the existing social order. So, although Wittgenstein had many personal reasons to be against the system in which he was living (as a homosexual he had to face forms of exclusion) he never developed a social criticism.

As to the hermeneuticians you mention: Gadamer was a conservative man. When I asked him what newspaper should I read in Germany, he answered: 'The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, of course.' This was his personal attitude. As a philosopher he was prudent, because he never overcame the idea that there is a basic distinction between the humanities and the natural sciences. He didn't want to attack these sciences, he wanted to be peaceful. For him, hermeneutics was only for the humanities, not for the natural sciences. However, it is very difficult to maintain that hermeneutics is only for the humanities and not for the natural sciences, because in fact everything is a matter of interpretation. For instance, Thomas Kuhn's concept of paradigm is an application of hermeneutics to the natural sciences. Heidegger was far more radical, and being more radical means running more risks. He decided to engage in politics for Hitler, because he believed that the philosopher should not be outside of the practical world. It was a good intention, with awful results. After he resigned as Rector of the University of Freiburg in 1934, he no longer speaks in terms of 'the inner truth and greatness' of a political movement.

My own proposal of bringing together hermeneutics and communism is a radicalization of what hermeneutics means. It means taking a radical po-

litical, and a radical anti-metaphysical stance. Heidegger argued that the totally organized world should be overcome, what he called *Verwindung*, a sort of distortion of logical metaphysics. What I try to do is radicalize his teachings. Heidegger should have been a ‘weak’ thinker, even though he himself would not have agreed.

Krisis: In recent years, communism seems to be back perhaps not so much on the political agenda, but on the philosophical agenda, thanks to yourself, but also to philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. However, especially Badiou and Žižek combine this return to communism with harsh attacks on postmodernism, most notably on the ‘politics of identity’. You have been one of the few philosophers who actually called themselves ‘postmodernist’. How do you read these attacks? Do you feel addressed by it, or do you think they have misunderstood postmodernism?

Vattimo: As far as I can understand them, because I don’t always understand them, I’ve tried to read Negri on Spinoza, or Badiou’s *L’Être et l’événement*, but I just don’t know what to do with it. I believe that Negri, Badiou and even Žižek are in a sense too much intellectually engaged, and less politically engaged. What does Badiou have in mind for a political action? This is not at all clear. There is a strong hermeticism in their works. I was from the beginning more a practical politician. Therefore I also urbanized Heidegger. Sometimes I even blame myself for having simplified Heidegger too much. But this has been part of my strategy: not to be too far from actual political life. I wrote for newspapers, not only because I am less radical than Negri, but also because I want to act more concretely.

Negri is, I believe, a little bit mythological with his idea of multitude. What was a class is now for Negri the multitude: more vague, more populist. And I understand this on a descriptive level, since that what’s going on with the working class in Europe, but I cannot see how you can make a program of that. It is very difficult to politically organize the multitude. I want to be politically engaged, not simply be a preacher going around the world.

This has to do with the postmodern criticism. These philosophers are too scientific, too metaphysical, and in that sense realists. Heidegger argued that nihilism means liberating yourself from the descriptive attitude. My idea is that Negri and Badiou are against postmodernism, because they still want to exactly describe the current political situation.

Krisis: You say that communism today represents an alternative to capitalism precisely because of its ‘theoretical weakness’. Several other theorists, such as Fredric Jameson, have argued that it is rather neoliberal capitalism that claims to lack any ideology, that is, claims to lack any ‘metaphysical’ fundament, and is just the system that ‘works’ most properly. Being purely pragmatic rather than having a political program, it could be embraced by political parties on the left, as happened to almost all labour parties in (western) Europe. How do you see the relationship between ‘weak thought’ and the ‘groundlessness’ of neoliberalism?

Vattimo: I was probably also guilty of being too friendly towards this attitude. When I wrote *The Transparent Society* I expected that technology would bring a sort of transformation in society, an opportunity for more plurality. If I have only one TV channel, I believe everything it says, but if I have hundred, my thought will ‘weaken’ as a consequence of the different world views expressed. But when Berlusconi won the elections, I realized that these hundred TV channels could be owned by one man.

The postmodernist movement, I believe, was an opportunity of transformation, but it was not taken. It is much like the current financial crisis: it is an opportunity to modify capitalism, but what governments do is re-finance the banks and thus prepare the next crisis. Postmodernism as a sort of automatic process of liberation was an illusion, an illusion connected to the trust in technology: the Marxist idea that developments in the means of production determine transformations in other spheres. I was never that orthodox. Take for instance the issue of copyrights in relation to the internet. It is an example of how technology makes it impossible to respect the old property rights. This shows that technological conditions contrast with social relations of power. This is what we discuss in Europe at the moment, and I am in favour of the pirates, because I believe we have to face a different regime.

I was never a conservative, but have to admit that I was too friendly to the conservative powers in Italy. Now I cannot write for newspapers any longer, because I am too radical. They don't want me any more [laughs]. I have assimilated some of the criticism against postmodernism. What I don't accept is the rejection of Heidegger and hermeneutics, because they are not realistic. In the heyday of postmodernism we took, for instance, into account the end of the working class, that there was no possibility to intervene with the labour unions. Postmodernism was an effort of tragic realism, i.e. taking into account what the technological transformations, such as the internet or television, mean. Marx could believe in a proletarian revolution, because he didn't know television. The opium of the people is now not religion, but television. That is one of the many reasons to refute metaphysical realism. Some of my former students want to return to Searlian realism. Now I am very suspicious of Searle, especially after George W. Bush called him the greatest American intellectual. With Nietzsche I say there are no facts, only interpretations. The reproach of irrealism implies a conservative attitude. Even in Marxism, the realist Marx was the Marx of Stalin: scientific Marxism. I campaign against the conservative nature of realism. I am in favour of the slogan of the protesters of '68: be realist, ask the impossible.

Krisis: Communism is the promise of a fair redistribution of scarce goods. Some scholars and politicians argue that justice encompasses more than that; it is also about the recognition of the specific identity of minorities (gays, indigenous people, etc.). To put it simple: whereas the struggle of redistribution concerns mainly equality, the struggle of recognition concerns, foremost, difference.

Wasn't it one of the basic flaws of communist ideology that it reduced the struggle of recognition to a struggle of redistribution? Don't you think that the reports on the human rights violations in Brazil, Bolivia and Venezuela by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch show that weak communism should also address the struggle for recognition? Don't you neglect too much this struggle, or identity politics, in Hermeneutic Communism?

Vattimo: This has been a problem for me too. Since my book on Nietzsche from '72, I've criticized the idea of identity. And this book was already meant as a philosophy of the political left, although it was completely ignored by them [laughs], since the left in Italy back then was still very much a form of Marxist realism. I was involved in the gay liberation movement, and wanted to criticize Soviet communism precisely because it ignored the problem of identity.

With Nietzsche I argued that self-consciousness – or what he calls Christian subjectivity – is not required for the survival of the individual, but is what is required in obeying to the master. So, criticizing the concept of identity means criticizing also the idea of family, or property. But later, just in Latin America, I discovered that the struggle for identity, for national or ethnic identity, was a way of opposing imperialism. In that sense I don't strictly separate the problem of recognition from that of redistribution: they are closely connected. In socialist Latin America I believe there is a strong communitarian life without denying the rights of the individual.

Krisis: But it's not merely a question of the individual versus the community. The Marxists wanted to do away with poverty. Whereas the idea of recognition is that, as a gay for instance, I want my lifestyle to be recognized. This struggle for recognition was neglected by the Marxists.

Vattimo: Take the problem of gay rights in Italy. I knew a lot of rich gays, who could freely live their lifestyle. They had a family, a house, another house with their male lovers, a villa in Morocco, etc. So, in a sense the problem of the gays in Italy was a problem of distribution: I had problems as a gay in Italy, because I could afford only one house [laughs]. If I have only one house, I live with a woman or a man, but if I have two or three houses, there is no problem. Furthermore, in every society there is a higher tolerance for rich gays than for poor gays, because richness means that you have power, you're a respected person and so forth. So, in many senses, this problem of recognition is not strongly separable from that of redistribution. The mistake of classical Marxism or communism is that they didn't take care of the recognition of differences in lifestyles, because they thought it was more important to redistribute richness.

The problems of the gays in Cuba have very specific historical reasons. I discussed the situation of the gays in Cuba with the daughter of Raul Castro, and the criticism that in Cuba gays are persecuted. The problem was that in the beginning Castro, for democratic reasons, left the power in the hands of the local chiefs. These were traditional people who didn't like gays. When things were later improving, the influence of the Russians came, who excluded gays from politics.

Krisis: So you expect that when in Bolivia or Columbia there is fairer redistribution, there will be more gay rights?

Vattimo: Yes, I think it's a question of an evolution of customs. I was recently in Istanbul, for a conference on communism, and I was astonished to discover that almost all people in my group were gays. But in these countries too there is an Italian compromise: you do what you want, but you don't do it publicly. Of course, this is not good, but it is a way of gradual social adjustment. It's a dilemma like that of the labour union: as a labour unionist, you can never be too radical, for you strive towards a better salary, working conditions and so forth. So you make compromises. The problem of recognition is very important of course, but it depends basically on the social structure. In a sense, I take the problem of recognition as a revolutionary motivation. But the revolution at the very end has to change the economic and social order.

Krisis: As a member of the European Parliament and as a philosopher you are known as someone with an outspoken view of Europe. In Zur Verfassung Europas (2011) Jürgen Habermas argues that Europe does not only have to face an economic crisis, but also a political crisis. The political integration of Europe is far behind its economic integration. Habermas and others underline that the democratization of Europe is very important for the solidarity among its citizens.

Do you agree with Habermas that there is a kind of imbalance between the economic and political integration of Europe? Do you think that the solidarity of the northern part of Europe with the southern part is under pressure? How are we to deal with the socio-economic and political fault lines in Europe?

Vattimo: Remember Gramsci's hypothesis on the unification of Italy. He considered it as a colonization of the south by the north. If we apply this scheme to Europe, we can perhaps understand the relationship between the northern and southern part of Europe. The rich northern would like to dominate the industrial power of the south. I don't know whether it's true for Europe or not. When the north of Italy occupied the south, the south was already industrialized. The first Italian railway was between Napoli and Portici. The north destroyed the industrial power of the south, taking it as an occupation land, exploiting it, taking the richness to the north. This is not so clearly demonstrated for Italy, but it's nevertheless an interesting hypothesis. The possible competition of the Italian industries with German, French and Swedish industries seem to be domesticized by the EU. I'm not sure whether this is true, but it might be interesting to explore.

Krisis: What would be necessary to make Europe more democratic?

Vattimo: I once wrote a little book during an election campaign, titled *Socialism i.e. Europe*. The cultural values of Europe are: solidarity, connection, pacifism, which are the basic elements of the ideology of socialism. Only a socialist Europe can be an effective union. When Habermas says that there is a political – and I would like to add also a cultural – problem with Europe, he paradoxically takes an anti-enlightenment position, because the globalization on the basis of realistic economic considerations was of course the ideal of Kant: the cosmopolitan republic, which was too strongly rational in order to be basically supportive. In this sense I see Habermas as making a self-correction of his enlightenment project. If there is no cultural basis, which is a shared attitude towards our lives, a shared political ideology, it doesn't function. What I see in Latin America for instance, is the huge impact of charismatic leaders. We don't need a Castro or Chavez in Europe, but we need moral sentiments. The enlightenment position of Europe was: let's make an economic union, the rest will follow.

Krisis: But, to defend Habermas, the enlightenment idea was also a commitment to democracy and human rights, as you said before. The problem Habermas addresses is that we discuss the economic crisis, which of

course is a serious problem, but we don't discuss the political crisis, which is a far bigger problem. The European Union is in need of a constitutional commitment and a transnational public sphere. That's not only cultural, but also political.

Vattimo: It's the problem of Hegel: in favour or against the French Revolution? In my opinion, Habermas is too rationalistic. He is engaged in constitutional problems. The idea that the proletariat is committed to a revolution is related to a more immediate experience.

We now have technocratic governments. Europe is a rational solution, but it's too rational in order to be a solution. Habermas addresses the same problem that I have in the sense that I want to have deep roots in the popular mind in order to reconstruct Europe. Why does Angela Merkel have to be so rough to Italy and Spain? – because the common feeling of the average German citizen doesn't support solidarity. When we constructed Europe, it was immediately after the Second World War, and people were more motivated for solidarity because they knew from very close the problems of destruction and so forth. Now we are a little bit too rationalistic, because we are better off. That's why we always have to remember the Third World, the fact that 15% of the world population exploits 85% of the resources. We have to be aware that the equilibrium is in our favour, but that it's not going to last very long. Economic domination involves the promotion of competition, and in order to be more effective, we have to become less human. This is a cultural problem.

Krisis: *That's a problem you share with Habermas. You address also another problem that is related to this: experience. The problem at the moment is that the experiences of the ordinary citizen in Greece are totally different from the one in Sweden. So you need a discourse to overcome the different and often antagonistic experiences. You have to convince the Greek and the Swede, to tell them a story, why they have to cooperate.*

Vattimo: I am not so enthusiastic about the discourse of human rights, because it has been often abused by the United States. The discourse of democracy has belied itself through bombing Iraq. All that has belied our ideology. Habermas is one of the last people believing in the United Na-

tions. He wants a cosmopolitan republic. However, the United Nations have too often remained invisible, for instance in the case of Palestine. I don't have a solution for that, but I see that the rational solution to preach human rights everywhere doesn't work, because you don't observe it.

Krisis: *Indeed, the discourse of human rights is often abused, but at the same time you say that you fight for the gay rights in Italy. That's at least ambivalent.*

Vattimo: I think of the thesis of Benjamin: the constructors of the future world are not so much motivated by the image of their liberated grandchildren, but rather by the suffering of their ancestors. First and foremost one should do justice to the suffering and not to universal values. I am more for the political struggle, than for the propaganda of human rights. I would expect from Habermas a stronger realism, and not international conference values. I would like to give stronger weapons to the peoples. All the wars in the world now are humanitarian wars. We invaded Libya, for instance, with the idea that we were protecting the rights of the Libyan citizens.

I agree with Habermas on the ends, but I am not sure whether he takes the right way. That's why I preach communism. Why does Habermas not preach communism? Because he believes that we have to be reformists. It's like the centre left in Italy: in order to produce some effect you have to make agreements, but on the other side the centre left is losing all its electoral consensus because they are too reformist. Preaching communism means you have to have a stronger democratic force in order to produce small transformations. Otherwise you get resignation. Habermas seems to be a little too much an international intellectual to realize that.

Krisis: *In your book The Responsibility of the Philosopher (2010) you are dealing with the tension between writing in the first person (for newspapers) and writing in the third person (for peer-reviewed journals). If one exaggerates a little bit, one could say that continental philosophy delivers more space for writing in the first person than analytical philosophy. You state in Hermeneutic Communism that 'analytical philosophy, as the*

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completion of scientific realism, legitimizes not only scientific enterprises but also the American government, which part depends on such enterprises. This is why, according to Derrida, analytical philosophy has an “imperialistic approach” interested in establishing a culture for a descriptive, static, and universal civilization where “no theoretical work, no literary work, no philosophical work, can receive worldwide legitimation without crossing the [United] States, without being first legitimized in the States.” (35-36).

Would you conceive analytical philosophy as a betrayal of what you see as the vocation of philosophy? Isn't writing in the third person in the end a hidden (political) form of writing in the first person?

Vattimo: The question is whether we still believe in a sort of neutrality of intellectual knowledge, philosophical, scientific, or not. I am strongly persuaded that there is no neutrality in statements on reality: there are no facts, only interpretations. This is a way of developing, as Ricœur calls it, the school of suspicion. You have to be careful: objectivity doesn't exist. Kant argues that there is a constructive intervention of the intellect. This is basically what hermeneutics wants to affirm. A fact is already an interpretation of a situation in which I am involved. When Nietzsche says there are only facts, only interpretations, he adds: this too is an interpretation. He doesn't want to describe objectively what knowledge is. As far as philosophy is concerned, it is important that it has tended to realize a form of universality: I am basically engaged to show something to everybody. This is true, but universality is constructed rather than present. Universality is something created by consensus. It is not that we agree because we've found the truth, but we've found the truth because we agree. Like Rorty says: solidarity before objectivity. Even in science, if you are not a quantum physics expert, you don't understand the proofs for quantum physics. You have to belong to a community, you have to be educated with a language and then you understand it. This is an important idea, because it refuses the domination of scientists. Science is more and more engaged with power, also because of the costs involved in scientific investigations. Hermeneutics vindicates the rights of the everyday language, of common culture, of common sense. It is again a problem of class, of exclusion and inclusion. The specific sciences create discontinuities in our language: we

don't understand it, but it has the possibility of dominating my own environment. Kant wanted to bring back the construction of science to a general intellect. And it is also what Marx wanted to do with dialectics: you don't isolate a phenomenon and take it as real, but you have to connect it to the totality.

Krisis: So, the good philosopher uses both perspectives, the perspective of the third person and that of the first person.

Vattimo: That's why as a philosopher I am engaged in politics. Analytical philosophy is suspect to me, because it accepts too easily the division of work: we are professors, we do our work, write books, persuade colleagues, but we don't leave our field. This is the way of accepting capitalism, to reify it.

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