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BACK TO THE FUTURE OF COMMUNISM
AN INTRODUCTION TO GIANNI VATTIMO

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Since the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers on September 15, 2008, many countries have to face a serious economic crisis. That triggered a public debate about the question of who should be held responsible. Should one blame greedy bankers who took irresponsible risks and left taxpayers to foot the bill? Or should one take a more structural approach, and blame the economic system that, if left unchanged, will cause an even more devastating crisis? Aren't the individual choices of bankers and others that collectively brought about the economic crisis rational responses to incentives that are inherent to a capitalist world order? How to deal with the deepening socio-economic fault lines that are characteristic for this world order?

In the wake of the financial crisis, several philosophers have argued against Margaret Thatcher's famous phrase that 'there is no alternative' (TINA) to capitalism. And one of the alternatives receiving more and more attention is communism, as a promise to overcome global injustice, i.e. to make an end to worldwide socio-economic fault lines that cannot be legitimized. In recent years, different scholars like Alain Badiou, Jodi Dean, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Gianni Vattimo, Santiago Zabala and Slavoj Žižek reiterate the idea of communism (Badiou 2010 a and b; Dean 2012, Douzinas and Žižek 2010; Hardt and Negri 2009, Vattimo and

Zabala 2011, Žižek 2013; see also the dossier on communism in *Krisis* 2011, issue 1).

Of course, this is by no means an uncontroversial idea. Many have argued that communism has lost all credibility considering the crimes and flaws of the so-called 'real existing socialism' in Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin-America. Can communism be separated from horrible political disasters of the twentieth century, such as Stalinism and the killing fields of Cambodia? The contemporary thinkers of communism emphatically distance themselves from such historical crimes, arguing that communism should be considered as an idea or promise. But what can communism mean today? To what extent does the new plea for communism differ from the one by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels?

Against the background of these questions the university of Groningen invited the famous Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo to give the Lolle Nauta Lecture 2012. Together with Santiago Zabala, ICREA Research Professor at the University of Barcelona, he wrote the widely discussed book *Hermeneutic Communism. From Heidegger to Marx* (2011). In his lecture, Vattimo addressed what he called the 'neutralization' of politics. In response to the financial crisis, Europe witnessed the emergence of technocratic governments such as those of Papadimos in Greece and of Monti in Italy. These governments argued that for the sake of economic stability 'everyday' ideological differences should be set aside, thereby suggesting that the choice of 'rescuing' the economy is not an ideological decision.

Vattimo contends it is a serious problem that nothing happens in our time. What Heidegger said about metaphysics is according to him also applicable to politics: the only emergency is a lack of emergency. What happened after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers confirms the neutralization of politics: the nation-states had to save the banks, welfare-state provisions became more than once the object of cuts, while the surveillance of the population intensified. There is hardly any serious political resistance. Radical change seems to be impossible. In Vattimo's view, the transformations happening in several Latin-American countries during the last decades are the exception, and one that should inspire us.

The idea of the neutralization of politics is for *Krisis* enough reason to pay extra attention to the philosophy of Vattimo. Frank Ankersmit dedicated some critical reflections to Vattimo's and Zabala's *Hermeneutic Communism*. Besides criticizing the thesis of the neutralization of politics he discusses the status of meta-narratives, the liberating and emancipatory powers of truth, and the use of the word communism instead of Marxism and neo-liberalism. *Krisis* also interviewed Vattimo. Preceding the article and the interview we present a short introduction to Vattimo's philosophy.

Nihilism and hermeneutics

Vattimo was born on January 4, 1936 in Turin. There, between 1954 and 1959, he studied philosophy under Luigi Pareyson. In 1961 he graduated with a thesis on Aristotle. Two years later he qualified as a professor with a book on Heidegger: *Essere, storia, e linguaggio in Heidegger* (Being, History, and Language in Heidegger). A Humboldt Fellowship gave him the opportunity to study under Hans Georg Gadamer in the beginning of the 1960s (Vattimo 2000). In 1964 he became professor of aesthetics at the University of Turin. The chair was changed in 1982 to a chair in theoretical philosophy. In 2008 he retired. Vattimo has always been politically active. For example, he struggled for the rights of homosexuals and he was twice a member of the European parliament. He believes it is the responsibility of the philosopher to be involved in politics (Vattimo, 2010, p. 101-117). His work was honoured with, among others, the Max-Planck-Forschungspreis (1992) and Hannah Arendt-Preis (2002).

Throughout his career, Vattimo's most important sources of inspiration have been Nietzsche, Heidegger and Gadamer. As the subtitle indicates, main concepts of these philosophers figure prominently in the book that made Vattimo famous outside of Italy, *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture* (English translation 1991, original 1985). Nietzschean nihilism means the abandonment of an idea that dominated philosophy from Plato to Kant, namely that there is a 'real' world behind the ephemeral and ever-changing phenomena. Getting

rid of truth with a capital 'T', however, does not mean one becomes a sceptic, since scepticism still implies a truth one cannot know. With Nietzsche Vattimo argues that the death of God means that we have the freedom to create ourselves and the world through interpretation: there are no facts, only interpretations.

The importance of *interpretation* already points to the other major source of Vattimo's thought: the hermeneutic tradition. Unlike Schleiermacher and Dilthey and like Heidegger and Gadamer, Vattimo considers hermeneutics not merely as a scientific method, but as an integral part of our everyday experience. *Verstehen* (understanding, interpreting) is what we do all the time, in our interaction with other people and the world. For Vattimo, this also means that our interpretations are all we have to work with: there is no ultimate interpretation, no 'grand narrative' to ground our interpretation. Therefore he depicts himself as a postmodern nihilist.

Weak thought

Vattimo is one of the few philosophers who actually called themselves 'postmodern' (unlike, for instance, Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault). In a book from 1983 that he edited with Pier Aldo Rovatti, Vattimo had first spoken of postmodernism in terms of *il pensiero debole*, 'weak thought'. Having witnessed the violence of the fascists and the left terrorists in Italy, Vattimo turns against *any* form of thought that claims absolute truth.

The intention of Vattimo's philosophy is a weakening of all forms of strong thought. For instance, with regard to religion it means a critique of fundamentalism. And concerning philosophy it is an attempt to deconstruct the history of metaphysics. However, Vattimo argues that we cannot just rid ourselves of our religious and metaphysical traditions. Therefore it's better to talk – as Heidegger did – in terms of a *Verwindung* (twist) instead of a *Überwindung* (overcoming) of traditions. Vattimo asserts that 'Heidegger [...] tried to solve the problem of the impossible overcoming of metaphysics [...] by elaborating a problematic notion that

in German is called 'Verwindung': not surpassing (*Überwindung*) but twisting, resignation, ironic acceptance. Of what? Of precisely the heritage of metaphysics, and thus once again of the West and its supremacy and the notion of universality' (Vattimo 2004, 27-28).

Vattimo argues that weak thought is not only a kind of thinking that acknowledges its own shortcomings, some 'ideal' we have to strive for; he also argues that reality itself has turned 'weak' in the age of the postmodern. This thesis is elaborated in *The Transparent Society* (1992 [1989]), in which he reflects on the role of mass media in postmodern society. Vattimo argues that communication technology has in modernity been a source of both hopes and fears. While enlightenment philosophers up until Habermas dream of a public sphere of well-informed citizens, philosophers like Adorno and Foucault dread the 'surveillance society' that is the outcome of the ideal of transparency. According to Vattimo, however, mass media have made contemporary society more chaotic rather than transparent: 'Instead, what actually happened, in spite of the efforts of the monopolies and major centres of capital, was that radio, television and newspapers became elements in a general explosion and proliferation of *Weltanschauungen*, of world views' (Vattimo 1992, 5). Mass media brought an abundance of different (religious, cultural, national) world views in the living room, thus confronting us with the contingency of our own, and 'weakening' our reality. Nietzsche's perspectivism suddenly became our general *modus vivendi*.

Return to Christianity

Unlike Nietzsche, Vattimo is committed to Christianity. While Nietzsche criticizes the Christian slave morality, Vattimo points to the moral significance of Christianity, which is the introduction of charity. Although Vattimo has advocated since the 1990s a return to Christianity, it does not mean he is not critical about this and other religions. He rejects especially the fundamentalism that is inherent to all dogmatic forms of religion, because it often leads to intolerance and violence. In fact, he has a weakening of religious fundamentalism in mind. Jesus stands at the cradle of a

hermeneutic weakening of religious fundamentalism when he reinterpreted the Old Testament, saying: 'You heard it was said... , but I tell you...' (Matthew 5).

According to Vattimo Christianity launched the process of secularization, i.e. the desacralization of the sacred (Vattimo 2009, 152). With Jesus divine truth leaves heaven and descends on earth. The *kenosis*, the emptying out of God via his incarnation, is the core of Christianity. Jesus breaks with the violent nature of natural religions. In the footsteps of Rene Girard Vattimo assumes that natural religions are based on creating a scapegoat (Vattimo and Girard 2010). Girard presupposes that human beings are characterized by the mimetic drive to imitate others, to have the same big house as their neighbours, etc (Girard 1987 and 1988). Since this will lead to violent conflicts that undermine the cohesion of a community, the conflicting parties focus on a sacrificial scapegoat. Due to the fact that the sacrificial scapegoat reduces violence it received a divine status. According to Vattimo, Christianity breaks with this crucial element of natural religions. He argues that Jesus was not crucified to sacrifice a scapegoat, but because he states that it is not true that people have to make sacrifices to God. While telling that God loves everyone and preaching the principle of charity he defeated the need to sacrifice a scapegoat. So Jesus signifies the instigation of secularization: the weakening of the strong structures of natural religions based upon mimetic rivalry and the sacrificial scapegoat.

In *Credere di credere* (1996) Vattimo underlines that the violence of the natural religions corresponds to the violence of metaphysics (Vattimo 1999). Jesus' critique of the need of a sacrificial scapegoat and Heidegger's critique of the forgetting of Being that is inherent to metaphysics both contribute to the emancipation of this violence. Therefore Vattimo argues: 'Postmodern nihilism is the up-to-date form of Christianity' (Vattimo and Paterlini 2009, 152). Both are messages of weakening. Despite these messages the beginning of the twenty-first century shows a re-emergence of strong thought. Examples are the discourses justifying the war on terror or the politics of austerity. In his recent work Vattimo argues that a weakened Marxism – hermeneutic communism – could resist these discourses.

Hermeneutic communism

This of course raises the question: can one be a ‘weak’ thinker and at the same time a communist? According to Vattimo, these are inherently connected; hence he speaks of *hermeneutic communism*, in the book of that title co-authored with Santiago Zabala. In *Hermeneutic Communism. From Heidegger to Marx* (2011) they argue that metaphysical realism (i.e. the belief that truth is ‘out there’) implies a conservative political attitude. If truth is objective, it is not in the hands of the people to change it. Hence, Vattimo and Zabala write: ‘The end of truth is the beginning of democracy’ (23). This also explains the ‘neutralization’ of politics as a consequence of the financial crises: the technocratic governments claimed they did what ‘objectively’ had to be done, with no ideological motives. Democracy was temporarily set aside. In the eyes of the rulers, it would only delay a necessary economic policy, while the people could not possibly understand the complicated measures needed to ‘rescue’ the economy. These rulers suggest that there is no alternative to austerity.

Weak thought goes against this political realism, as it goes against metaphysical realism. ‘Weak thought can only be the thought of the weak’ (96), Vattimo and Zabala write. It is the thought of those suppressed by the presumed ‘reality’. The weak have a radically different interpretation of this reality. For them, post-crisis technocratic politics is not a ‘rescue operation’, but re-instating and confirming an oppressive power. Hermeneutics is set against the idea that there is no alternative to capitalism; for hermeneutics, there is *always* an alternative, because one can interpret the status quo differently. The name Vattimo and Zabala give to this alternative is communism. They primarily define it negatively, indeed as a radical alternative to the seemingly ‘natural’ and ‘reasonable’ course of capitalism.

But there is also good reason why they speak of ‘hermeneutic’ communism, namely to distinguish it from (Soviet) ‘scientific’ communism. Scientific communism believes history is governed by iron laws, leading to only one possible outcome: a classless society. Hermeneutic communism, by contrast, means that history is a radically open and contingent process, which is all the more reason to discuss our world views in a political arena

that deserves the name. Hence their call in the conclusion of the book: ‘[We] have only described the world in various ways. The moment now has arrived to interpret the world’ (140).

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