

FRANK ANKERSMIT

TOWARDS THE DEATH OF NEO-LIBERALISM

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1. Introduction: 'Nothing happens'

Gianni Vattimo makes the somewhat rueful observation that 'nothing happens' in our time. Let's suppose his observation to be correct. Since news invariably tends to be *bad* news, I expect many people will not be too unhappy about this. Is there not a great deal of truth in Hegel's claim that happy times ordinarily give us the blank pages in the book of history? And these people might go on by pointing out that quite a lot happened in the years between 1914 and 1945, but that in 1945 every sensible person will have welcomed the arrival of less troubled times. So, if 'nothing happens' we'd probably better rejoice in this than be worried about it.

Next, though this undoubtedly is a matter of taste, one might also have one's doubts about Vattimo's observation that 'nothing happens'. Didn't George W. Bush's paranoiac reaction to 9/11 trigger wars in Afghanistan and Iraq resulting in the destruction of these two countries and in the dislocation of an already highly unstable region? Did this same George W. Bush not succeed in achieving what was still wholly unthinkable some

ten to fifteen years ago? Namely, to expose to all of the world the limits of the USA's military power, because of its amazing incapacity of realizing in Afghanistan and Iraq in some ten years what the Rumsfelds and the Cheneys had expected to do within a mere few months. Was this not Vietnam all over again? Next, did the stories of Abu Ghraib, about waterboarding and other kinds of torture, the kidnapping of often innocent people, and the shame of Guantanamo Bay not reduce the USA's customary pretensions of moral supremacy to ignoble ridicule? Furthermore, the country is becoming more and more a harsh plutocracy guided by moneyed interests. Moreover, there is an increasing gap between the constitutional definition of its democracy and its actual practice, where we see the exclusion of the black and the poor from the democratic process. Finally, the credit crisis of 2008 and the impending so-called fiscal cliff have severely shaken the country's reputation as the world's most reliable and trustworthy economic leader. Compare the USA of 2013 to that of 2000 and you will see a superpower in decline. Maybe the USA will surprise us in the future – as it has done before – but at present it is in a very poor shape. Well, is this not a major event?

Vattimo argues that 'even the rise of the BRIC' doesn't look like an innovation: the economic power of contemporary China, and possibly India, he regards as merely a change in economic leadership. But in a world dominated by economy such changes may be decisive for the future. Moreover, they may well have a direct political spin-off; just think of the build-up of Chinese military power that so much worries its neighbours. Or think of Europe, our own continent. The European Union meant the end to Europe's division between the left and the right banks of the Rhine – a division that in its many manifestations had determined European history since the partition-treaty of Verdun of 843 AD. Eleven hundred years of history came to an end with the European Union. However, in case the euro fails a new division might replace the old one in the near future, namely that between the North and the South. Resentment about the euro's failure will fuel this new opposition in Europe. And what disasters await us if Europe falls apart? In sum, it can be argued that quite a lot happens in our time – though I shall be the first to admit that we should think here rather of processes than of datable wars, revolutions or battles.

2. 'Bad infinity'

Nevertheless, I believe I can understand Vattimo's lamentations about our age. When thinking them over I was reminded of Hegel's 'schlechte Unendlichkeit', or 'bad infinity'. In order to grasp what Hegel had in mind with this, think of these series: one half, two fourths, three sixth, four eights, five tenth and so on to infinity. Each member of the series looks different from all the others, but basically they are all the same: they are all different ways of writing the number with which the series begins, that is, a half. Similarly, one could think of a series of successive societal states that at first sight seem to differ from each other but that are, on closer inspection, just mere variants of one and the same.

That contemporary capitalist society, governed by technocrats, exemplifies Hegel's 'bad infinity' was already argued by Herbert Marcuse in his famous cult-book of the Revolution of 1968, his brilliant *One-Dimensional Man*. His main argument in this book was that Hegelian and Marxist dialectical development had come to a complete standstill and had thus left us with mere variants of the model of capitalist society. Substantial or essential change had become impossible and unthinkable. I add in parentheses that self-evidently such observations are possible only against the background of Hegelian or Marxist *meta-narratives*. I mean, only if one discerns in history a big story or narrative – and whose continuous development has effectively been stopped by capitalism – only then does it make sense to worry about the fact that 'nothing happens'. I insist on this since Vattimo in his book entitled *Hermeneutic Communism* expresses his agreement with Lyotard's rejection of so-called 'meta-narratives' as presented by Hegel and Marx. It seems to me that this rejection of meta-narratives is not easy to reconcile with worries such as Vattimo's regarding our present predicament in which 'nothing happens', and about our history having come to a standstill.

3. Truth

Vattimo discusses in his book on hermeneutic communism how we might overcome our present philosophical and political impasse. Of

course, there is something of the paradoxical about the title *Hermeneutic Communism*, since we associate 'communism' with the kind of absolute and unshakable certainties that hermeneutics always questions. Communism presents us with undebatable truths about how the just society should be organized, whereas hermeneutics always requires us to respect how others think about some issue and, hence, to do away with the very idea of undebatable truths. But it is one of the main claims in *Hermeneutic Communism* that the gap between the two notions is not as wide and unbridgeable as we might believe at first sight. Taking into account the semantic tension between the terms 'hermeneutic' and 'communism' I think it's fair to say that in the end with Vattimo's book the former triumphs over the latter. For the first part of the book is one continuous attack on the pretensions of metaphysical, epistemological and scientific truth – or what Vattimo refers to as 'the politics of description'.

Obviously, this is in agreement with the notion of 'weak thought' (or 'il pensiero debole', proposed by Vattimo in his writings of the 1980s and that most of his readers will immediately associate with his name). Even more so in this book, Vattimo is quick to associate truth with imposition, violence, political conservatism, injustice and lack of respect for our fellow human beings. All this is succinctly summed up in his statement that 'the claims of truth are also the claims of political power'.

Though I see Vattimo's point I think that he too quickly dismisses the liberating and emancipatory powers of truth. We owe to scientific truth, to rational and unprejudiced debate, in short to Kant's 'sapere aude', the victory over the dark powers of superstition and obscurantism. Surely this did not automatically mean the entry into paradise. But it can hardly be doubted that we had better take truth and reason as our compass in all things human than error, falsity, stupidity, prejudice and irrationalism. And this demands that we should always be prepared for an open and respectful debate with those with whom we disagree. More specifically, as hermeneuticists have always urged, we must relinquish no effort to come to an emphatic understanding of the others' points of view and to take as seriously as we can the others' beliefs and opinions. It is to be regretted, in this context, that Vattimo clearly takes sides with Derrida in the latter's notorious debate with Searle about how to interpret Austin's theory of

the performative uses of language. Derrida's deconstructivism is, as the very word itself suggests, a reading against the grain and a deliberate effort to circumvent a text's author's manifest intentions. Whatever merits one might wish to ascribe to deconstructivism, following the interpretative strategy recommended by it will inevitably reduce all discussion to a 'dialogue des sourds'. It will result only in mutual irritation and frustration, just as Freudian 'Es-deutungen' in a marital quarrel will only intensify it. Rational argument is the inevitable victim – and one can only therefore agree with Jürgen Habermas' observation that 'Derrida nicht zu den argumentationsfreudigen Philosophen gehört'. Even the Cardinal Bellarmine can be considered an admirable interlocutor in his debate with Galilei, when compared to Derrida's behaviour in his debate with Searle. And, as I venture to say, this is the worst sin that a philosopher can be guilty of. In philosophy there are no *obiter dicta* – an open discussion in which one takes one's opponents completely seriously is all one has to go on.

In all fairness I should add that Vattimo is not as adverse to the notion of truth as one might infer from what I've just been saying. For at several occasions he expresses his agreement with Heidegger's conception of truth as 'alêtheia', as 'Unverborgenheit', hence of truth as something that is revealed to us, as if a veil hiding truth had been removed. This is a conception of truth that captures quite well what truth is like in the humanities, as opposed to the sciences. So one may wonder how Vattimo would compare truth as 'alêtheia' with truth as description. If I'm not mistaken he does not address this issue in *Hermeneutic Communism*. As is the case with Richard Rorty, for whom Vattimo has the greatest respect – (as I do, for that matter). Rorty argued that no interesting results are to be expected from a philosophical analysis of the notion of truth. Well, I feel no urge to challenge that claim. But it does not follow that the term truth should have the same meaning in all contexts in which that term is used. Rather the opposite, I should say. I find it very hard to agree with Rorty that from the perspective of truth there should be no difference between 'the Bellarmine-Galileo issue' and 'the issue between, say, Kerensky and Lenin, or that between the Royal Academy (*circa* 1910) and Bloomsbury'. What is gained by deliberately remaining blind to these all-too-obvious differences, I wonder?

4. Communism

I now get to the word 'communism' in *Hermeneutic Communism*. I wonder why Vattimo preferred the word 'communism' to 'Marxism'. 'Marxism' is a more pliable term than communism and therefore easier to reconcile with hermeneutics. Admittedly, there is indeed one place in the book where Vattimo attacks 'the polluting factor' of private ownership and this is, indeed, suggestive of communism. But elsewhere he does not go to such extremes and restricts himself to advocating what Marxism traditionally stands for. Then one can only agree with him. Since the Soviet regime has been dead now for more than twenty-five years the time has come for a more open-minded (re-)appraisal of Marxism. Surely the USA could well use a little dose of Marxism? Moreover, in our present financial crisis a lot can be learned from the Marxist account of financial capitalism as proposed by Rudolf Hilferding (and that inspired Lenin in his *Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism*). He may also be right in claiming that we can learn from some South American countries. Though here I myself tend to be sceptical since the more countries differ, the less you can be sure that what is good for one is recommendable for the other. Anyway, one can only further this discussion after Vattimo has been a little more explicit about the meaning he gives to the term communism.

5. Neo-liberalism

Finally, I wholly agree with Vattimo's attack on neo-liberalism throughout his book. I even believe that the triumph of neo-liberalism in the West in the last two decades might explain 'the neutralization of politics'. Just think of neo-liberalism's privatization agenda. Milton Friedman had argued that the state's only task should be the definition and the preservation of property relations. The realization of Friedman's program would reduce the public domain to virtually zero. And if the public domain no longer exists this must also mean the end of politics, of political discussion and of all political struggle. Indeed, it results in the neutralization of politics by entrusting the decision about our collective future to private

hands. We're then back in the feudal Middle Ages. So let's pray with Vattimo for the death of neo-liberalism.

In the last twenty-five years we have witnessed the demise of the two most prominent political ideologies since the French Revolution, liberalism and communism. Both ended up not only by being a caricature, but even being the very denial of its original self. Liberalism broke with feudality, whereas neo-liberalism is feudality in a new guise. Communism aimed at the liberation of the proletariat, but Soviet-communism enslaved it to a degree unknown before its triumph in 1917. We must therefore be skeptical about a return to either of these ideologies in its pure, original form. Apparently both carry within them the seeds of their own self-denial. So much then for Vattimo's plea to return to communism; perhaps there is no alternative but to trust our capacity to identify the flaws in our contemporary societies and, above all, to hope that we shall have the courage to do what is needed for redressing them.

Frank Ankersmit is emiritus professor Intellectual History and Philosophy of History at the University of Groningen.

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