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Can There Be Radical Change without an Outside?

“What have we all got to expect that we allow ourselves to be so lined with disappointment?”

– Graham Greene

Conventionally, to speak of radical change implies a change that is sought, or is imposed, and not just change that transpires independently of the will. Hence to speak of radical change implies a meaningfulness that relates it to a goal, a goal to be attained or a goal that proves to be unachievable. Philosophers have given this goal different names and have criticised both its abstract nature and its readiness to let itself be recognised. Thus, heterotopia and atopia turn critically against utopia. Heterotopia opposes utopia inasmuch as it names an otherness within an existing space, an otherness that ceases to be abstract. Atopia opposes utopia inasmuch as it names a drifting that meaning can no longer capture and channel, a drifting that ceases to be identifiable and to function according to an organising principle.

If the radicality of change is to be meaningful, a radicality by which indifferent change can be distinguished from a change that matters, or by which change that acquires its meaning because it may pose a threat to self-preservation can be contrasted with change attempted beyond the limitations that the preoccupation with self-preservation forces upon all concerned, then it must be informed by thought. Without thought, without the capacity to form, or imagine, ideas with a scope extending further than self-preserving interests, change conforms to the given, to existing conditions, and thus sinks into indifference, or into the impossibility of making distinctions and considering what it is that truly matters. But then radical change cannot amount to the realisation of an idea, at least not to the extent that any such realisation conflates thought with a given and tries to transform mere thought into a thought that proves effective in and as reality. Radical change, change that deserves to be called change on account of its ability to aim at the given, or at reality, and break with self-pres-

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ervation, with the preservation of the given, amounts necessarily to the realisation of an idea that maintains the idea as idea, as that which is not a given, or as that which, when measured against something given, appears to be nothing. There can be no radical change, then, unless it involves an understanding of the idea and its nothingness, the nothingness of ideality and the nothingness of thought's activity, which consists in an affirmative dissolution: thought keeps dissolving what it asserts, or it keeps moving on. It is this double nothingness of thought, its otherness, that radical change needs to maintain in the course of its own effectuation, to maintain not in the sense of an approximation indicating a lack to be infinitely remedied, or a gap to be continually filled, or a task to be perpetually carried out, the idea being by definition remote and out of reach, but in the sense of a sublation that has stopped serving the purpose of progressive effectivity.

From a topological point of view, such sublation shares with heterotopian spaces the reference to an otherness that is not unreal and with atopian spaces the reference to a drift that is not productive. Yet it differs from heterotopia and to some degree also from atopia in that it remains indebted to a notion of change and that the relevance of this change is not restricted to a single individual, or to a group of individuals. While it is true that change needs to be accomplished by every single individual for himself and cannot be delegated, it is equally true that one can never change alone, on one's own, and that radical change accomplished by a single individual is radical change accomplished by all individuals, no matter who they may be. The possibility of radical change calls for an effort to be made individually and at the same time does not exhaust itself in this effort, as if making the effort to change radically were tantamount to exposing oneself to a change that is more powerful than an individual can be, or as if making the effort to change radically were an effect of subjectivation, not an act caused by an existing, already constituted subject. Radical change takes hold of every single individual. It supervenes upon the individuals who make the effort to change radically. This is why ultimately it exceeds appropriation, be it by a single individual, a group, a collective, or even humanity, provided humanity could be regarded as an identifiable agent. It communicates with thought by virtue of an irreducible but not abstract otherness. And this is also why, in a

sense, radical change has always already occurred and why, in Adorno's enigmatic words, it is the possible, never the real that blocks the path to utopia.¹

Two remarks must qualify the concept of radical change introduced so far. On the one hand, the meaningfulness bestowed upon change by its radicality, the meaningfulness of what truly matters, and what matters to more than one, is always a meaningfulness ascertained after the fact, one that depends on the inventiveness of thoughtful radical change. As a consequence, the self-evidence with which radical change affirms itself and on which its meaningfulness hinges, cannot shelter it from doubt. In addition, radical change cannot but run the risk of surrendering a possible meaningfulness to the meaninglessness of aborted invention. Radical change, which is an action determined by the activity of thought, by the imaginative formation or inventive conception of ideas, is not just a way of doing something differently as a result of something having been conceived of in a different way. It is an action traversed by otherness, exactly like the activity of thinking itself, and as such it is both illuminated and obscured by this otherness.

On the other hand, radical change is not thought applied. Rather, radical change occurs when thought has pushed its own otherness, the nothingness of its affirmative dissolution, to the extreme at which a new idea emerges and presents itself as a powerful yet momentary interruption and reorientation of thought whose force cannot be contained within a previously disclosed space of ideality. Radical change occurs when the overwhelming force of a new idea outstrips ideality, becoming an impulse with practical consequences, to use traditional terminology. However, if this is so, then understanding the idea and its nothingness in view of understanding meaningful radical change entails understanding how a force that can be no more attributed to mere thought, to contemplation, or to ideality, than it can be attributed to praxis, to an intervention in the given and a transformation of reality, is in fact generated. What can be stated at the present point is that the sublation of the idea, its conservation in radical change, should be comprehended as the constant generation of a force that rebels against the course prescribed by progressive effectivity. The generation of

¹ For a more detailed account of this assertion that can be found at the end of the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, see Alexander García Düttmann, *Visconti: Insights into Flesh and Blood*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, passim.

this atopic force institutes a heterotopic setup, in which an effective otherness triggers both a subjectivation effect, the constitution of individuals, or subjects, who commit themselves to radical change, and a transformative effect that does not allow itself to be traced back to a specific effort and instead seizes this effort violently, as if it originated in an outside. One should remember what many witnesses and supporters of May 68 report, namely that the events that brought about radical change at the time, in a laboratory of new ideas, happened suddenly, in an unpredictable and contagious manner.

However, the generation of an atopic force of thought is not enough for the institution of the heterotopic setup of radical change. An experience of something intolerable and unacceptable about life under particular historical, political, and economic conditions, and the more or less militant resistance such an experience provokes are indispensable elements for radical change to take place, since their absence would surrender the atopic force of thought once again to an ineffective otherness, to abstraction and, in a way, to a recognisability that betrays abstraction, rather than denoting an alleged concretion.

To the extent that radical change, or the encounter of the atopic force of thought with militant resistance to something intolerable and unacceptable, concerns the whole of given historical, political, and economic conditions and takes on the form of an all-or-nothing, it shows itself to be a process of politicisation. A newly constituted individual instance continues to be implicated in this process because of the irreplaceable and finally unshareable effort the self must make for change, change of the self, to come about, irreplaceability and unshareability being at the very heart of solidarity between the agents of change. At the same time a subject arises, a subject that is not an individual, and signals the fact that radical change also proceeds from the outside, exempts no one, and exceeds every one, regardless of his or her characteristic individual traits. Hence the agent of radical change is split into an individual and a subject. The individual implicated in the process of politicisation is still recognisable as this or that individual, as an individual with characteristic traits. But it becomes increasingly unrecognisable as it begins to instigate change and as change begins to affect it, which is why despite its recognisability this individual is never simply an individual that exists before it gets implicated in the politicising process of change: something about it remains unrecognisable from the start. The subject, however, bears the stamp of unrecognisability from the very beginning of the

process in the course of which it arises, it bears the stamp of the outside and seeks to establish itself as a subject of change, or as a subject of recognition, a subject that acknowledges change and yet can never recognise itself fully lest the outside should cease to be an outside.

If the agent of change is thus a split agent, it is so by reason of the outside to which it must relate, the outside that has laid hold of it before it can even relate to it, the outside to which it cannot relate without the relationship being an asymmetrical relationship, a relationship interrupted in its very inception.

How, then, is the atopic force of thought generated, the force that turns into a radically transformative force the moment it encounters a force of resistance set off by an experience of the socially unbearable, as if a force could be a force of change, a force that relates to an outside, only insofar as it feeds on the outside already, on the outside to which the unbearability of given conditions testifies? The atopic force of thought is generated by telepathy. Elaborating this perhaps surprising answer demands a selective reading of two texts by Jacques Derrida, “Living On” and “Telepathy”, that at first sight seem to have little in common, whether with respect to their content or their form.

In “Living On”, a text accompanied by so-called “border lines” or, in a more literal translation, a “logbook” (*journal de bord*), and first published in the collective volume *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Derrida ponders the possibility of a philosophical *skandalon*, the possibility of a provocative suspension of what could be called a normal, conventional, or academically justified reading of texts. He ponders the possibility of a particular text with a presumed unity that renders it recognisable and identifiable, actively allowing for another text to be read, another text to which, according to established standards, it remains utterly alien and unrelated. A text, situated at a distance from another text, at a chronological, contextual, or structural, distance, a distance all the more insurmountable as both texts know nothing about each other, do not refer, mention and touch upon each other, presents the other text in such manner that it becomes readable, as if, without each other, the two texts remained somehow abstract, unintelligible, or closed upon themselves. Texts, Derrida claims in “Living On”, may live on in other texts and impart life to these texts, texts may read one another and thereby reveal themselves to be “machines with multiple reading heads for

other texts”², even though their relationship appears to be completely arbitrary from the point of view of a sensible account that could link one text to the other. To the extent that the account demanded by philology from any approach to a text that wishes to protect itself against the reproach of arbitrariness, of manipulation, falsification, nonsensicalness, or irrationality, is similar to the “demand”³ with which, if we keep following Derrida, a narrative begins, the demand to recount, or state, how things relate to each other in truth, it can be said that there is always another truth, a truth of truth, and hence a “supplement of truth without truth”⁴, that obstructs the narrative demanded, or duplicates the “demand for narrative”, requiring a different narrative or a different account beyond the narrative or the account rooted in the system of verifiable, demonstrable, provable references. It can be said that texts, for example narrative texts, stories, or novels, invent their own unpredictable narrative as they partake in a “telescription”⁵ where one text writes the other as it makes the other readable and permits itself to be made readable by the other text. In short, a text may “love”⁶ another text, as Derrida puts it in his logbook. A figure in a text may even “love”⁷ a figure in another text, another narrative, “telescription” shifting into a sort of telepathy, into an instantaneous attraction and affliction, a mode of being affected by an intuitive communication across an unbridgeable distance. “Telescription” and telepathy signal an infinitely accelerated surmounting of separation though perhaps not its abolition. However, while “telescription” is a word that emphasises distance and spacing, the spacing Derrida detects in writing, telepathy is a word that emphasises distance, too, but also the fact of being affected, of affection, to which attraction and affliction point. When a text loves another text and makes it readable inasmuch as it writes the other text, the two texts are so intimately connected that they can hardly be told apart. Still, they do not fuse into one single and yet again unreadable text.

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If “telescription” and telepathy name an intuitive communication, an understanding that surfaces on the spot between texts separated by an uncrossable

² Jacques Derrida, “Survivre”, in: *Parages* (nouvelle édition augmentée), Galilée, Paris 2003, p. 141.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

gulf, it is obvious that the unexpected and illegitimate relationship to another text that makes a text readable in the first place is a relationship of immediacy and at the same time an impeded relationship, a relationship marked by the distance it overcomes. This “telescriptural” and telepathic relationship makes a text readable in the first place, it makes it intelligible, because it frees it from a unity, an identifiability, a conformity to the law that throws it back onto itself, imbues it with darkness, and constitutes its opacity regardless of how much it purports to illuminate and elucidate it. One no longer knows which text produces the other text. Yet it is telepathy – in Derrida’s “Living On” the love between two or more unrelated texts that make each other immediately comprehensible just as they make each other irredeemably inscrutable – that generates the atopic force of thought. It does so because thought develops an idea and an idea, which is not an argument, comes about only when a disjunctive junction, or synthesis, of unrelated terms, or elements, whether they are considered texts or not, disrupts existing systems of reference and presses itself on thinking beings in a fashion both absolutely convincing and scandalously improper.

Three further questions need to be asked here. Assuming that it is telepathy that generates the atopic force of thought, telepathy as intuitively shared experience of instant attraction and affliction that overcomes a distance which it also maintains and reaffirms in the very moment that the conveyance, the transmission, or the encounter take place, then what is it, actually, that permits such an experience, or communication, to occur, especially if it is to occur between the elements of a transpiring idea, between texts, for instance? Why should telepathy be cast in the vocabulary of love that Derrida uses? And what is it that distinguishes the arbitrariness of the idea from the arbitrariness that drowns it rather than letting it come to the surface?

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If one looks for an answer to the first question in the wake of Derrida, it is the text that permits a telepathic experience such as the one examined in “Living On” to occur. Text as conceived of by deconstruction defines a space in which “the part is always greater than the whole”⁸ and “the edge of the set is a fold in the set”, so that nothing can be said to be more uncertain than a border, or a limit. “The apparently outer edge of an enclosure”, Derrida writes in “Living On”, “far from being simple, simply external and circular, in accordance with

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131 f.

the philosophical representation of philosophy, makes no sign beyond itself, toward what is utterly *other*, without becoming double or dual, without making itself be 'represented', refolded, *re-marked* within the enclosure, in the midst of its internal surroundings, or at least in what the structure produces as an effect of interiority."⁹ The impossibility to which Derrida alludes in this passage, the impossibility of establishing the spatio-temporal enclosure of a circle, is the impossibility of ever ascertaining where a text, or a space, or a spatio-temporal projection that show themselves to be structured like a text, begin and where they end, what it is that remains external to them and what it is that belongs to their internal organisation. Paradoxically, this impossibility, which should not be confounded with a removal of all limits and an opening of all borders, does not preclude the intimation of an otherness, an otherness that, in spatial terms, is equal to an irreducible outside and that, in temporal terms, is equal to an immemorial past or a future yet to come. Only a text or a space or a spatio-temporal projection with clearly determined limits or borders desists from "making a sign beyond itself", toward an outside, either as a result of relating to itself exclusively and abolishing relations altogether or as a result of transforming the outside into an extension, an external territory, or a colony, of the inside, into a modification of the present. Hence the text as conceived of by deconstruction defines a space that is a space, a spatio-temporal projection precisely because it has borders and limits. But having borders and limits means creating a passage as much as a barrier. It means pointing beyond, to the otherness of an outside, and reproducing this opening within the enclosure, so that whoever inhabits space is always on the border, neither here nor there, neither inside nor outside. This is why, in a sense, telepathy, a communicative movement that annuls and erects borders in an undecidable manner, that comes to a halt as it takes flight, that ratifies separation as it defeats its effects and that keeps indicating an irreducible outside on which the formation of an inside must rest, is the form of communication that corresponds to deconstruction and the spatio-temporal projection it describes when analysing the strange topology of the text. Telepathy, the deep, acausal synchronicity established between incomparable elements, generates the atopic force of thought, the force of a new idea, precisely insofar as it bears the trace of an incommensurable outside, of what is "utterly other".

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136 f.

In “Telepathy”, a text published in 1981 as a kind of annex to *The Postcard*, Derrida discusses Freud’s different attempts to denounce and appropriate telepathic powers. In the course of this discussion, he alerts the reader, whom he apostrophises, to a “final paradox”, namely that telepathy does not, as one might expect, exclude, contradict, or disavow the intractable erring that exposes communication to all sorts of failure. One cannot appeal to telepathy if one wishes to rule out the possibility of a message not arriving at its destination, of it not being what it is meant to be, a message identifiable as a message, a message with an identifiable content, a message sent by an identifiable sender and addressed to an identifiable receiver. A possibility, then, the possibility of going astray, is supposed to have a destabilising effect not only on the modal distinction between possibility and actuality but on a form of transmission seemingly designed to avoid the pernicious consequences of non-fulfillment and failure, of not making it or not getting there. Yet Derrida’s “final paradox”, which undermines the assumption that telepathy “guarantees”¹⁰ the delivering of a message, an assumption he refers to as “ultimate naivety”, does not just state that telepathy, too, is submitted to the erring inherent in communication, inherent in communication as a possibility with far-reaching repercussions for the logic of modality. Rather, it states that it is “because”¹¹ there may be such a thing as telepathy that deliverance of a message at its destination may not happen. Does this “final paradox” not remind us of the topology of the outside sketched out in “Living On”? Is it not on behalf of this topology, of the uncertainty of borders and the temporal scope of such uncertainty, that one must conceive of it? Does the temporal scope, or projection, of the uncertainty of borders not entail that something may take place, an event foretold by a dream or telepathically foreseen in waking life, without however accomplishing, effectuating, or realising itself in an external reality opposed to an internal reality, so that telepathy confirms and postulates the topology of the outside? But does the localisation of Derrida’s “final paradox” in his topology of the outside not conflate two distinct understandings of telepathy that must be kept apart, since they are not consistent with each other?

On the one hand, the topology of the outside and its temporal projection appear to ensure the functioning of a telepathic communication that is not upset by the

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Télépathie”, in: *Psyché. Invention de l’autre*, Galilée, Paris 1987, p. 249.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

distance it overcomes, by the possibility of going astray that the distance between the communicating instances creates. The possibility of going astray does not seem to impinge upon a telepathic message that finds its corroboration in an event taking place without actualising itself in external reality. On the other hand, the topology of the outside and its temporal projection appear to thwart the functioning of telepathic communication, as if the emphasis placed on the distance and the separation at the heart of this communication could not but prevent the message from ever reaching its destination.

One way of holding on to Derrida's "final paradox" would be to stress the arbitrariness of the encounter, as in the communication between unrelated elements that generates the atopic force of thought. Two heterogeneous elements that meet can engender an idea to the extent that the unrelatedness and the heterogeneity of the elements, the arbitrariness of their encounter, pertain to it essentially and testify to the irreducibility of distance and separation, of a fundamental erring. An idea can never show its full credentials, it never works like a better argument aiming at being the best of all arguments because its force, the force of its creation or formation, is an atopic force, a force generated by telepathy, by a simultaneous overcoming and maintaining of distance and separation, by an overcoming and maintaining of distance and separation that continues to signal toward an outside, a heterogeneity. The encounter occurs, it occurs on the border and as something borderline, yet it is all the more forceful the more it is at risk, the more it appears to be erratic – erratic because, as an encounter between heterogeneous elements, as an encounter itself heterogeneous, both foreseeable and unpredictable, instantly persuasive and entirely dissuasive, it could also not have occurred. In occurring, it does not occur. In this perspective, the two understandings of telepathy that the localisation of Derrida's "final paradox" in a topology of the outside allows for are the two parts of the paradox, as it were. The heterogeneity of the telepathic encounter, of the concomitance of a "feeling"¹² and a "suffering", a closeness and a distancing, can also be gauged from the fact that whatever it is that precedes the encounter, the elements of the idea, or two texts that attract each other, constitutes itself in the instant of the encounter, when the texts make each other readable, write each other, diverge from each other only to merge into each other.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

Now if Derrida casts the encounter, the encounter to which an idea leads and from which an idea springs forth, in the vocabulary of love, it should be noted that the uncertainty of borders provoked by the topology of the outside and its temporal projection inhibits the impulse to identify such talk with a purely metaphorical discourse. Obviously, one reason why Derrida speaks of a loving encounter is that there can be no idea, no insight, without love. “*Solo chi ama, conosce*”¹³: “only the one who loves, gets to know”, the Italian writer Elsa Morante is purported to have said. Yet a deeper reason for Derrida’s casting the ideal and heterogeneous encounter in the vocabulary of love must be sought in that for him, loving involves acknowledging the heterogeneity of the encounter. When a text loves another text to which it cannot be related, it places itself in the position of whoever or whatever feels touched or affected by the other’s words or signs and *therefore* acknowledges the “divisibility of [their] destination”: “You have no illusion about the divisibility of the destination, you don’t even inspect it, you let it float, committing yourself to it eternally, [...] you are there to receive the division, the splitting, the breaking-up, you gather it together without reducing it, without harming it, you let it live and everything starts between us, coming from you, everything that you give by receiving it.”¹⁴ Yet, as this passage suggests, the encounter does not merely happen. It is also a spontaneous achievement, if spontaneity is nothing but courage, a seizing of anxiety that proves to be a virtue without an object, or without a framework of instantiations. Love and courage belong together, or, to say it differently, the idea is engendered in a hetero-auto-affection that makes its force an atopic force.

As to whether it is an idea that will have led to the heterogeneous encounter and whether it is an idea that will have sprung forth from the encounter’s arbitrariness, in a “telepoetic”¹⁵ telepathy of love in which the idea will have appeared to be its own precursor and its own successor, or whether, conversely, the arbitrariness and the heterogeneity of the encounter will have hindered a telepathy of love from manifesting itself, there seems to be no way of telling in advance,

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¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *Autoritratto nello studio*, notttempo, Rome 2017, p. 14. Is this not the implication of the very definition of philosophy, does one not love knowing because it is by loving that one knows?

¹⁴ Derrida, “Télépathie”, p. 240.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 239. Derrida unravels the concept of “telepoiesis” in his *Politics of Friendship* (1994). See also: Alexander García Düttmann, *Derrida and I: The Problem of Deconstruction*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, p. 72 f.

especially if an idea remains embattled, as it must. An idea remains embattled for as long as it is an idea and not a refutable or improvable argument, an argument that is open to improvement or even refutation but that puts controversy to rest once it arrives at the destination of its teleology, broaching the ideality of the best of all possible arguments. To repeat, an idea is an idea. Ideas may fight one another but there is no better idea and no idea that could be best. An argument severed from an idea, an argument that is not deployed within the space disclosed by an idea, the space of a topology of the outside and its temporal projection, an argument that takes the space of its deployment for granted, the space of logic, or the space of an accepted system of references, lacks atopic force. It may convince in a forthright fashion yet it does not change anything, not radically. It does not become effective in a heterotopic setup.