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BOOK REVIEWS:

REBEL CITIES; STATES OF WAR: ENLIGHTENMENT ORIGINS OF THE POLITICAL; AND THE COMMUNIST POSTSCRIPT

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ABSTRACT

This article contains three book reviews, each of which relates in its own way to the larger academic category of political theory. The reviewed books are: *Rebel Cities* (2012) by David Harvey, *States of War: Enlightenment Origins of the Political* (2012) by David William Bates, and *The Communist Postscript* (2009) by Boris Groys.

KEYWORDS

David Harvey, David William Bates, Boris Groys

DAVID HARVEY. *REBEL CITIES. FROM THE RIGHT TO THE CITY TO THE URBAN REVOLUTION*. VERSO: NEW YORK, 2012.

David Harvey's recent book *Rebel Cities* was not coincidentally published from the background of ongoing mass social movements; this book emerges from the context of the Occupy Wall Street movement. As Harvey, a prominent geographer and leading Marxist economist and theorist, notes in an interview, the *Occupy* movement is different in two respects from what has been happening in terms of social struggle movements in advanced capitalist societies throughout the last fifteen years. Firstly, it has foregrounded the problems of social inequality and the injustice in the distribution of the common wealth. Secondly, in distinction from mass movements that are typically one-day protests, the occupy movement, as Harvey observes, shows some signs of persistence. One could add that what started as "Occupy Wall Street," a New York based movement, quickly spread around the globe. Slogans have appeared not only to occupy this or that street, but also cities, buildings, workplaces, and so on.

Rebel Cities is a very timely book. In this work Harvey tries not only to provide a theoretical backbone for explaining the relationships between the logic of capital, urbanization, and the appropriation of common resources (both tangible and in-), but also to think through and constructively critique the alternatives that are being proposed mostly from the political left (but not exclusively), indicating both their potentialities and limitations. Above all, Harvey insists on a simple yet powerful demand, one which underlies his book, namely: for the common right(s) of all to shape the city according to individual and common desires and not according to the 1%—the joint clique of bankers, developers, financiers and the very wealthy. *Rebel Cities* does not engage in an extensive analysis of capital, nor is it a purely polemical reading. Rather, it draws upon the major critical ideas of capitalism that have stood the test of time and that date back to the tradition of Karl Marx's critique of political economy. Harvey's book updates these ideas within the context of the contemporary city, social movements, and the general situation of capitalism today.

The implicit, ironic, insightful question that Harvey poses throughout the book is the following: if a city is produced and reproduced by its citizens/workers/(re)producers, why does both the economic and symbolic-cultural value and surplus value produced get continuously appropriated and controlled by a handful private interests? For the context of this question, we must bear in mind that Harvey reconceptualizes and updates the figure of the worker from the

classical Marxist proletariat to include the non-material workforce, such as precarious workers and the increasingly significant sector of domestic workers responsible for the reproduction of city's social fabric. Harvey's key question begs an answer on two levels: first, what are the structural qualities of the system that allow and/or engender this; and secondly—the normative one—do I (and whatever "we" there is) want this kind of distribution of wealth (understood in a broad sense) and are we satisfied with the current arrangement?

Harvey's book provides a highly compelling and largely satisfying set of answers to these questions, supported by a great deal of empirical evidence. In the process of giving his answers, he equally updates and revitalizes Karl Marx's classical critique of political-economy, though not without his own particular twists, especially given his background as a geographer.

Harvey is convincing when he proposes that a stronger emphasis be put on secondary forms of exploitation—by merchant and land capital—than on the primary, production based form, which receives greater emphasis in Marx's critique of capital. Harvey is also correct to stress Marx's own point that: for capital what matters is the whole cycle of circulation, and therefore it is not of importance for capital whether the value will be re-appropriated at the workplace or after work in the practices of consumption and interest/rent. In fact, as Harvey notes, in the post-industrial stage of capital and its new financial innovations, it is likely that it is within the secondary forms of exploitation that the largest amount of value appropriation occurs.

This also leads Harvey to a significant point in his updating of Marx's classical critique of capitalism, namely, reconceptualizing the worker. Harvey suggests a greater emphasis on re-productive work, usually hidden behind private walls, neighborhoods and streets, and externalized out of capitalist balance sheets. He also advocates extending the idea of work to include its immaterial aspects. The concept of immaterial labor has been circulating since the 1960s' Italian *operaismo* movement, with its theorists who were reacting to de-industrialization and the new, slowly appearing realities of workers. The traditional left, however, even up until now has been very reluctant to update their theoretical understandings and to admit the shifting importance and relevance of immaterial labor. Harvey, however, unhesitatingly incorporates the conception of immaterial labor in his book, which, when thinking about social mobilizations, allows him to switch from an emphasis on sectoral mobilizations to geographical mobilizations, concentrating on neighborhoods, streets, and the city in general.

Perhaps one of the most interesting critical remarks conveyed in the book is the idea of monopoly rent, and in particular the ability of capitalist operations to

capitalize on cultural and symbolic values that circulate and are produced in everyday life. Harvey rightly points out the contradictions that the system of capital displays in seeking uniqueness on the one hand, in order to acquire monopoly rent; but, on the other hand, it needs the commodity's quality of tradability, which in turn diminishes or destroys the uniqueness factor. The question that Harvey does not pursue, however, is what the origins of the demand of the 'unique' might be in the first place. It seems to be an important question to ask when engaging in a critique of capitalism. For Harvey, in *Rebel Cities*, the demand for uniqueness is a given, and the fantasmatic kernel of it is not touched upon.

On the question of what needs to be done, Harvey in his book provides a sobering critique of the contemporary new Left by pointing out its theoretical weaknesses and particularly concentrating on what he calls the problematics of scale and the fetishism towards certain organizational preferences (having in mind the dominating preference for horizontalism). Harvey in *Rebel Cities* forces the reader to intellectually engage with (by paying particular attention to) the problem of how certain theoretical constructs or practical tactics might work fine on a small neighborhood scale, but when one switches to the city level or even global level and needs to tackle pragmatic questions of water, sewage, waste and similar city-wide service management, one—if fetishistically overemphasizing certain organizational preference—can become incapable of providing adequate answers and possible solutions when the scale changes.

Harvey's proposal to the jumping scale problem is: mixed instrumentalities for different scales and situations. Harvey acknowledges that at certain levels or situations hierarchy might be necessary. For someone coming from a Leftist, let alone more radicalized, even anarchist tradition, this might sound uncomfortable, to say the very least—maybe even unacceptable. Harvey seems to stick here more or less to the classical humanist perspective, supposing that the structures are erected and dismantled at the will of their creators, as if standing outside. Harvey needs to account here for the fact that the organizational structures do continuously re-make their creators as well. That is why Harvey perhaps too easily relegates the problem of organizational structures to questions of pragmatics. Hierarchical structures seem to provide deeper consequences for subjectivities than merely the matter of pragmatic governance problems. However, humanism is not what Harvey adheres to in his book. In another section he seems to acknowledge Robert Park's insight that, in making the city, humans have remade themselves. Nevertheless, Harvey's problem of scales holds well and needs to be accounted for if one has an interest to actively shaping the city according to individual desires.

Even though Harvey engages in critiquing painful points that tend to get bypassed both due to their sophisticated nature and simply because often currently existing theoretical tools are not capable of helpfully addressing them, overall *Rebel Cities* sustains an optimistic tone. Harvey, in the end, seems unconcerned which theoretical tradition is right or wrong. His more practical approach looks at what would work and what would not in reclaiming the city for its citizens and gaining greater democratic control over the production and use of surplus. In this approach, he pays special tribute to Henri Lefebvre, dedicating the preface of the book to his legacy and influence on the idea of the right to the city. For Lefebvre, and it seems for Harvey as well, what happens in the streets and neighborhoods, and the ideas that arise from them, seems to be more important than the dominant intellectual trend(s). It is in this pragmatic approach with an optimistic evaluation of contemporary heterogeneous and broad-platform social movements that Harvey's book is refreshing, thought-provoking, and inspiring. Harvey emphasizes that in order to think about alternative, lasting practices to capitalism, one has to engage not only in the broad theoretical reflections, but re-start the more systematic critique of capital as well. Harvey concludes in his book that such critical practices are already happening both on micro-scales, as well as recently, in the aftermath of crisis, on much wider geographical scales. Although, according to Harvey, they lack coherence and durability, examples from South American cities as well as the Occupy Movement provide very real hope. Harvey understands well that to provide coherence for any multiplicity demands a nodal, and therefore empty, signifier upon which to mobilize the heterogeneous groups. For Harvey, as for Lefebvre, it is the slogan for the right to the city.

Rebel Cities provides excellent reasons for why, at the contemporary junction of capitalism's developments and crises, this signifier would be most suitable. Although this book could be branded a leftist tract, the idea of the city dweller and citizen that Harvey proposes in the end blurs the artificial left/right political boundaries. *Rebel Cities* is an important book for any city dweller interested and invested in the ability and capacity to change one's own common environment and to reinvent the city more after our own heart's desire.

Reviewed by Edvardas Giedraitis.

DAVID WILLIAM BATES. *STATES OF WAR: ENLIGHTENMENT ORIGINS OF THE POLITICAL*. NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012.

David William Bates' *States of War: Enlightenment Origins of the Political* is one of the most provocative recent interventions into the renewed scholarly interest in sovereignty and the concept of the political. It also is a non-traditional response to Carl Schmitt in that it offers neither support for nor outright refutation of his ideas (although a potent critique is present a deeper level), but an extension of them. However, Bates' attempt to counter the autonomy of the political by subordinating it to law still remains doubtful and fails to fully convince in the end, especially with his attempt to reconcile security interests and universal human rights, drawing especially on the thought of Rousseau. The book is undoubtedly innovative and insightful in its usage of a Schmittian toolkit for analyzing the Enlightenment, often challenging the established interpretation of the period and 'defamiliarizing' the Enlightenment, to use Bates' own term. It is a well-known fact that Schmitt himself was not particularly sympathetic to the Enlightenment, seeing in it the deistic worldview that severed political thought and practice from its original religious-theological foundations. Bates, meanwhile, attempts (and often succeeds) in demonstrating that the thinkers of the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries were struggling with the same dilemmas as Schmitt was, and often coming up with rather similar solutions. Indeed the discovery of the autonomy of the political delimits the progression that leads Bates from Grotius to Rousseau.

Bates digs deep into political unity and its nature, especially in the context of an existential crisis when unity must be defended despite any source of it being questioned. It is the political that appears in such a situation as the defense of unity. Moments of crises particularly amplify the tension between constitutionalism and law on the one hand and the existential power of political authority on the other. Also, in such moments of crisis it becomes especially evident that legal norms are not there to enforce themselves and need to be imposed upon a political community from outside and yet at the same time from inside of the political community. In short, it is the function of the sovereign authority to constitute order. This was true of Weimar Germany but this is also true of the early twenty-first century. And it was also the case during the Enlightenment. In addition to this, for Bates it is impossible to analyze constitutionalism and rights of citizens without at the same time inquiring into interstate warfare and foundational violence. It was the evolution of the territorial state into a military-bureaucratic security regime taking part from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century that is seen as having

determined the existential logic and intensity of the political. Therefore, it was also a period where important reconsiderations concerning sovereignty, law, and the political had to be made. An all-important corollary to this is negotiating the relationship between the state as a norm-based egalitarian democratic community that presents itself as all-inclusive on the one hand, and a community based on (often inherently violent) exclusion and self-limitation, bounded not only materially but also historically, on the other hand. This tension between a supposed universality and an objective particularity of a political community is not a theme of the past—not only Enlightenment thinkers but also modern political theorists struggle with the paradoxical nature of the (democratic) state. However, it is precisely here that a reader is left wondering whether this relationship (or rather tension) can really be negotiated in a legal and rational manner, as Bates argues.

The core issue of Enlightenment political theory, in Bates' view, is that of the creation of a set of norms legally protecting an individual from within the existential logic of a political regime that is historically specific. This perfectly corresponds with the corollary mentioned above. For Bates, the Enlightenment is not only about contract and techniques of government. In his view, the major theorists of the enlightenment have been 'fundamentally misread' by reducing them to the status of critics of sovereignty, and therefore misunderstood as moving in a completely different direction than Schmitt does when theorizing the autonomy of the political. This is a bold claim indeed. Bates attempts to prove it by concentrating on the Enlightenment theorists' interest in war and foundational violence. There was no inherent justification of a political community – only an existential political foundation that could legitimize authority. Thus the concept of the political is, for Bates, the discovery of Enlightenment thinkers and not an object of their criticism. As a matter of fact, the political and the legal limitations of state violence were developed coextensively and in direct relationship with one another, and this relationship is still important today because, despite the postulations of sovereignty's decline, the state is still the field where power and law clash directly.

The complexity of the matter lies in the paradoxical position and nature of the political. On the one hand, the political has to be autonomous in order for specifically political criteria describing a community to exist – and only then an understanding of political legitimacy (both of a particular act and of a state as such) is possible. On the other hand, the autonomous political can also mean power that has no limit external to itself. Thus any political community constantly oscillates between the pressing need to restrain and limit political power and yet to thrust into the open the field of purely political contestation which is the only means to preserve the grouping in times of crises when rational and legal legitimations fail.

For Bates, just as legal order must at the same time be based on the pre-existing political unity of a people and lay the foundations of and criteria for the very existence of the same people, the autonomous concept of the political is at the same time a potential savior and a potential destroyer of communal order. However, if the political is an ineradicable, albeit potentially dangerous, part of the process of creating and maintaining the state, it can at least be accommodated. In Bates' interpretation, the political is an existential category without any content and thus exists only as a potentiality but never as justified by particular human conflicts or, conversely, as a means of justifying them by itself. Of course, Schmitt himself did not impute any specific content into the concept of the political. In fact, for him any stake could reach the political status if only it acquired an existential intensity. However, the potential for ultimate conflict and violence (civil war) was always a real possibility for Schmitt. It is in order to ground the divergence from the original concept that Bates' genealogy of the political comes into play.

As Bates reads it, there was no concept of the political (and there could not even be one) in the writings of natural-law theorists, such as Grotius and Hobbes, due to their emphasis on the rational autonomy of the natural individual. Indeed, an autonomous rational actor cannot give birth to a specifically political principle because it lacks the social dimension needed for intense relationships to develop. It was only with Pufendorf that an independent logic of social organization was hinted at, but then again subordinated to state institutions, the purpose of which was to protect the rational autonomy of individuals and to ensure social order. Therefore, the political had not yet acquired autonomy. It is with Locke that Bates sees the first isolation of the political—as the decisive principle of defending one's community from external threats. For Locke, the original integrity of human communities was fractured by the emergence of property and the advent of capitalist accumulation because it creates new conflicts within the community and destroys trust and legitimacy through corruption. Therefore, the challenge is to recreate political unity when fragmentation, distrust and hostility prevail. A remedy is found in law, commitments, and principles and thus the autonomy of the political is still diminished. A fundamental shift in conceptualizing the autonomous political, as Bates sees it, takes place with Montesquieu only.

In Montesquieu one finds a threat of war—both interstate and civil—that not only challenges the community but also elevates it to a new level by creating a *political* community—a body that has a sovereign power capable of defending the community as such (and not just one part of it or a single interest). This is not to say that the grouping has a clear political consciousness as a unity but only that it is *refounded* as a unity in the face of an imminent dissolution. Therefore, one

encounters for the first time a specific field of the political. There is nothing natural about any unity, which is now constituted through power only. This is especially true because the sovereign figure is prompted also by an internal threat—the threat of civil war. The sovereign, then, constitutes the essence of the political. But yet again, the sovereign so created cannot be left unchecked because otherwise it would be left with unlimited power and violence even after the existential threat which had spurred its coming into existence has gone. Contrary to the established interpretation, Bates argues that Montesquieu does not actually propose the rule of law as a preferable remedy. England and Rome, paramount examples of rule of law for Montesquieu, are given, according to this interpretation, not as models to follow but only as exceptional and unusual cases, in which sovereignty had failed to establish itself. It is only because no one actually rules that the rule of law is established—as a sort of prosthetic device. From this it follows that the task of the constitution and the wider legal framework in general (in line with a system of cultural restraints that have developed organically) is less that of restraining sovereign power and state violence, but to uphold the *status quo*—the historically and politically contingent but nevertheless already established political community and its internal organization. Definitely, these two goals are not mutually exclusive because upholding the *status quo* also means protecting the already existing liberties from threats both internal and external to the community as well as eliminating pure political violence by making it either law-making or law-preserving. This corollary lacks elaboration in Bates' book. Arguably, the *double* functioning of the constitution does raise it above a mere prosthetic function into an epicenter of both control and contestation—in essence, of sovereign power (once again in contrast with the exceptional cases where laws simply *are* and *govern* supposedly by themselves).

Bates finally moves to Rousseau, who proves to be the most important author in this genealogy of the political. The reading of Rousseau is based first and foremost on exploitation as political power is seen as a mere reflection of socioeconomic power. Therefore, even if law still has a protective function, it no longer protects liberties but only entrenches the inequalities, vertical relationships and exploitation present in a society. As a result, Rousseau sees the political as an existential concept in a peculiar way: it is no longer related to the existential crisis of the society but to that of the individual—it is only in this way that a liberating power is possible. This move is fundamental for Bates because it elevates the capacity to protect the individual as the central defining feature of a political community, independent of any historically contingent existence. Instead, its instrumental characteristics (such as equality, freedom, and independence) become

important. Another result of the political emanating directly from the individual is that political unity is no longer exclusionary at its core—no longer a fictional homogeneity but rather an absolute consensus of free individuals for the sake of self-preservation. It is only for this end that a coordinated whole of the society is created. Bates sees two fundamental consequences here: first, the membership of the political community is potentially unlimited (and the political can transcend the state), thus countering Schmitt's claim that 'humanity' is not a political body; second, the political becomes a remedy from power relations and not an embodiment of them. These arguments are vital to Bates' subsequent exploration of the modern relevance of the (primarily Rousseauldian) political, especially when interpreted in line with another of Rousseau's concepts, that of the general will.

Rousseau's general will, for Bates, is the singular logic that drives all the parts of the political body. However, the singular nature of this will needs more elaboration. This is not exactly the unity of content, which would eradicate or subsume any difference. It is singular in a sense that it is concerned solely with the survival of the political body and is aided in this by the legal and governmental institutions that serve as channels for conveying information and will. Therefore, despite the singularity of the general will, the social contract *a la* Rousseau is seen not only as non-essentialist but also as precluding any identity whatsoever. As a result, arguing directly against Schmitt, enmity cannot be the origin of the political because there are no pre-existing communities to be politicized. The political *per se* is no longer a social category but absolutely mimetic to the existential demands of the individual. As a result, it is freedom—of both the individuals and the body that they comprise—that characterizes a political society, which is radically open and not limited to any particularity. Thus, as already mentioned, the political community is infinitely extendable and knows no necessary outside, the only requirement being that those who wish to join commit to the general will. In this way Bates hopes to have overcome the tension between the autonomous logic of the political and universal human rights as well as the globalized international community. However, in reality he leaves crucial questions unanswered.

There are at least three major problems that Bates does not address. First of all, his quasi-Rousseauldian contract is spurred by an existential threat that urges individuals to enter into an organized political community under conditions set out in a social contract. However, if that community is potentially global, it is no longer possible to see a threat that would motivate the individuals to uphold a community because there would no longer be an outside (and thus a threat). Or, if a threat would be made apparent, it would be a creation from *inside*, i.e. a potential manipulation and a clear indication of unequal power relations that are supposedly

avoided. Closely related to this is a second issue, namely, which threats out of the many that are encountered by a community should be tackled and how this should be done. There is no doubt that different individuals may join a political community because of different existential insecurities. However, the community as a whole is not able to address a plethora of threats simultaneously. Therefore, existential insecurities of some are prioritized against the insecurities of others and become a *conditio sine qua non* of the political community, even though not necessarily relevant for most of its members. Therefore, a contract is based on particularities, posing as universalities. Fear and loathing become social, and not individual issues, and the political still *does* require a grouping. Finally, Bates' argument requires two fundamental elisions, one in Montesquieu and one in Rousseau. As already stated, Bates misses the *double* functioning of Montesquieu's constitution, which makes it the epicenter of political contestation. But also the empty general will *a la* Rousseau is problematic. To say that it is filled by particular individual wills channeled by political institutions and any outcome is always already agreed upon is to pass appearance for reality. Indeed, for a political system to function, its actions have to be passed as the will of all. But the question of who decides (a core Schmittian question) still remains unanswered. As a result, the general will is an object of contestation but hardly ever on an individual level as Bates would like to have it.

And yet, credit has to be paid to Bates' work. First of all, it is due to the innovative approach applied to both the Schmittian political and Enlightenment thought. Bates is absolutely correct in that much more attention has to be paid to the Enlightenment in searching for answers to the questions that seem to be pressing in our modern societies, and he thus puts significant effort towards demonstrating how crucial contributions might be unpacked. He also offers provocative new readings of otherwise seemingly familiar thinkers. However, the book appears to be driven more by its *telos* of reconciling universal human rights and globalization with the political than by impartial and disinterested analysis. One is only left wondering if Montesquieu and not Rousseau was the real central figure of the Enlightenment political.

Reviewed by Ignas Kalpokas.

BORIS GROYS. *THE COMMUNIST POSTSCRIPT*. LONDON: VERSO, 2009.

Vladimir Nabokov was a chess composer; usually a person who engages in such an activity transforms the ordinary rivalry between White and Black into competition between composer and solver, and the latter is not really expected to lose.¹ The main principle of chess composition lies in the economy of potency, i.e. in the distribution of chess pieces across the chessboard in accordance with the needs of the problem itself; it involves a construction of potentiality through obstacles and restrictions, and the chessboard *is* the initial limitation. In other words, the chess composer deals with the elimination of surplus so that the problem itself would be appear as something more than a game situation, but rather as a phenomena with its own conventions and principles.

Among other things, Nabokov was also a very complicated interviewee: he always self-conducted his interviews. He was particularly persistent about receiving the questions beforehand, so that he could answer them prior to the actual interview. This type of operation produces a strange relationship between question and answer: there is no dialogue, really, but, for some reason, the illusion of one is still important. And so Nabokov would proceed in ways such as this:

INTERVIEWER: Good morning. Let me ask forty-odd questions.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV: Good morning. I am ready.²

According to Boris Groys in *The Communist Postscript*, in 1950 Joseph Stalin had an opportunity to conduct what appears to be a self-interview: an official Communist newspaper, *Pravda*, had published (on June 20th, July 4th and August 2nd) a series of answers by Stalin to the questions raised by "a group of young comrades" concerning linguistics and Marxism. And Stalin began as follows:

QUESTION: Is it true that language is a superstructure on the base?

ANSWER: No, it is not true.³

In this respect there is fundamental difference between Stalin and Nabokov: if the latter knew that someone is actually asking him something, that *someone is actually there* waiting for the interaction, Stalin knew exactly the opposite: that *there is no one* who could ask him anything. In this lies the importance and difficulty of Groys's study: even if Groys recognizes the fact that those young

¹ W. K. Wimsatt, "How to Compose Chess Problems, and Why," *Yale French Studies* No. 41 (1968): 80.

² V. Nabokov, "The Art of Fiction no. 40," interviewed by Herbert Gold, *The Paris Review* No. 41 (Summer-Fall, 1967) // <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov>.

³ J. Stalin, "Marxism and Problems of Linguistics," *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxist.org) (2000).

comrades—e.g. Comrade Krashennikova, Comrade Sanzheyev, Comrade Kholpov, etc.—were created (as there is no evidence of the occupations, background and existence in general of these people), he continues to argue that communism needs to be understood as “the project of subordinating the economy to politics in order to allow politics to act freely and sovereignly.”⁴

In other words, while the (capitalist) economy operates in the medium of money, politics functions in the medium of language. Consequently, humans that are living under the conditions of a capitalist economy are doomed to remain mute: economic processes cannot be expressed in words, they are “anonymous”. In contrast, communism is a fundamental transcription of society to the medium of language: for in capitalism every statement functions as ideologically free, i.e. as a commodity. The possibility of critique requires action from the position of communism, where, in contrast, “every commodity became an ideologically relevant statement.”⁵ This point is crucial for Groys, because it means that it is possible to confront every commodity produced by the communist system (e.g. Soviet Union) with ideological critique, just as it is possible to criticize the official doctrines of historical materialism. In short, “everything that is decided in language can be criticized linguistically as well.”⁶

Groys speaks of politics that, in its essence, elevates and highlights social divisions and contradictions. He goes on to recall Plato, who defines a philosopher as someone who conceives of society as a whole. In contrast, the sophist is someone who hides and conceals the inner contradictions of language, disguising the paradoxes in what appears to be contradiction-free speech: “[t]he impression of an absence of contradiction can be conveyed only by the rhetorical surfaces of speech.”⁷ The logical conclusion is that, in a democratic (and, therefore, communist) regime where the main medium of the society is language, there are no “coherent” or “true” (as well as “incoherent” or “untrue”) opinions and statements, because “it would undermine the equal opportunities of opinions” to become competitive in the marketplace of ideas. This is why it possible to think of the Soviet Union as a state “governed by philosophy alone”⁸, i.e. by the representatives of Marxism-Leninism and its supposed dialectical presence. “Dialectical materialism”, Groys continues to argue, “believes that life is internally contradictory.”⁹ So why does Groys then offer the example of Stalin’s self-interview, which is clearly about the abolition of the potentiality of contradiction?

⁴ B. Groys, *The Communist Postscript* (London: Verso, 2009), p. xv.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xx.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Apparently, Groys is concerned with *what* Stalin wanted to say¹⁰, whereas he should perhaps pay more attention to the means of expression. Politics is not the act of speaking; it is not even the possibility of dialogue; rather, it lies in the *potentiality* to speak, i.e. in the process of becoming a political subject. Stalin addressed society as mute-beings, as the ones who are not able to speak and this is precisely the reason why there is nothing political about Soviet communism.

“What is” is always already a post-political phenomena—it is a stable object of administration. In contrast, politics is dealing with the *not-yet* political subject: if for Groys the political subject is given prior to the act of expression of one’s opinion, then, as Jacques Rancière argues, politics cannot be identified with such a model, because precisely “parties do not exist prior to the declaration of the wrong.”¹¹ In other words, according to Rancière’s line of thinking, there is nothing political in gathering into communities, in discussing, arguing and negotiating over specific issues, etc., simply because all these processes are post-political acts. As Jean-Louis Déotte explains: “those who speak out ‘politically’ do not exist politically before this act of speaking out.”¹² “Politically,” in this case, means the possibility or potentiality for an intervention—an intervention that could be exercised on the logic of the presupposed subjects.

Interestingly enough, Nabokov was also a lepidopterist, i.e. a person who collects and studies butterflies and moths. Naturally, one needs to catch the butterfly in order to study it, and Nabokov was hunting them too. And so the citizens of the Soviet Union were as free as Nabokov’s butterflies: they were the objects of analysis and experiment. Thus, augmented by the theory of politics found in the work of Jacques Rancière, Groys’ book in the end may offer its readers, at the very least, the following insight: that there was as much politics in the relationship of the Soviet state and the Soviet citizen as in the *rendezvous* of Nabokov and the butterfly.

Reviewed by Mindaugas Bundza.

¹⁰ As Alexei Yurchak demonstrated, after 1950 in the Soviet Union there was no correspondence between what was said and what was meant. In other words, the “forms of ideological representations” became a much more accurate expression of every-day life than the “literal meanings” (see A. Yurchak, “Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45:3 (2003): 480-510).

¹¹ J. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 39.

¹² J.-L. Déotte, “The Differences between Rancière’s *Mésentente* (Political Disagreement) and Lyotard’s *Différend*,” *Substance* # 103 33:1 (2004): 79.