

Dictatorship Contra Critique

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— DICTATORSHIP CONTRA CRITIQUE

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We are confronted, today, by the very real prospect of a return to dictatorship. This means the preponderance of a state's executive arm unshackled by the rule of law, balanced and checked neither by judicial and legislative branches of government, nor by a free press. Such a pre-eminence of executive authority once characterized the feudal order in which kings (and queens) were assumed to possess a "divine right to rule." The prospect of its return is becoming truly global in scope. From eastern Europe through Turkey to India and beyond, the possibility of undisguised and unfettered assertion of sovereign power is unmistakable.

The global trend towards dictatorship, a trend, it must be stated, which Trump simultaneously *reflects* and *enables*, is articulated clearly against classical liberalism in general and the Enlightenment's bourgeois idea of "critique" or criticism in particular.

In what follows, I shall argue that if elements of the Left—though certainly not the Left as a whole—are suspicious of critique (and of reason more generally), and there is ample evidence that this is indeed the case, then its purported "anti-fascism" will ring increasingly hollow.¹ In fact, my argument is aligned with the historical experiences of twentieth century socialism which takes up a critical, dialectical view of the legacy of the Enlightenment. The reason for this is that fascism represents nothing less than an attempt to negate the Enlightenment. If it is possible to take Sigmund Freud's famous slogan "Wo Es war, soll Ich werden" (Where id was, there ego shall be) as crystallizing the essence of the Enlightenment project, then, in place of reason, fascism seeks to install lugubrious affects. Genuine anti-fascism ought, at all costs, to avoid mirroring core aspects of what it opposes. Easy to say; difficult to do. As Michel Foucault writes in his preface to a book he describes as "an introduction to non-fascist living," Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*:



Victor Arnautoff, *Life of George Washington*, 1936. George Washington High School, San Francisco, California. Photos: Richard Evans.

How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behavior?²

An important corollary to the impending prospect of dictatorship is the eclipse of the very idea of critique and criticism. As one of the twentieth century's most important anti-fascist philosophers of art and aesthetics, Theodor W. Adorno, once argued, the institutional form of critique in bourgeois democracies is an idea that can be traced to Enlightenment political theorists John Locke and Charles de Secondat Baron de Montesquieu about the separation and balance of power. In other words, the sovereign power of a state's executive branch would be off-set by the other two arms—the judicial and legislative branches. Here, as in the Enlightenment idea of "Kritik"—the idea would be the establishment of limits through rational self-reflection. The connection to cultural criticism ought to be clear: claims are confronted immanently by counter claims oriented to exposing inner contradictions. By insisting on the idea of critique, Adorno implicitly countered the Schmittian idea upon which dictatorship, the "political" and sovereignty were based, namely: decisionism. Decisionism was based on an existential choice no longer oriented by limited (and limiting!) rational criteria. Like the will of God, sovereign decision aimed at freeing itself from every possible fetter at will. It issued not from reason but from

what Kierkegaard called, in connection with the *Old Testament* story of Abraham and Isaac, the "madness of decision." It was what he called the "teleological suspension of the ethical."³ The Sovereign was always the giver though never the receiver of law; the sovereign by definition could never be bound by it.

While historically, a revolutionary Left greeted the rise of emergency powers and steadfastly sought to maintain forms of critique while seeking, as well, in the words of Walter Benjamin, "to bring about the real state of emergency,"⁴ by which, of course, he meant revolution, now something very different is afoot. Today, there are many signs that critique and criticism are themselves under attack by what presents itself as the "Left." Is it possible to discern the logic of dictatorship in the realm of art and culture more generally? Monsters can indeed be discerned in this realm and take the form of a drive of elements of the "Left" to seize extraordinary powers exercised in the name of

purportedly “authentic” identities. This is, of course, paradoxical as the very idea of “Left” and “Right” emerged out of the French Revolution, but yet the contemporary “Left” bids adieu to this revolutionary experience and its intellectual antecedent, the Enlightenment, as irredeemably “Eurocentric.” The legacy of the 20th century Russian and Western European avant-gardes, with which Benjamin was in deep critical dialogue, continued on well into the 1970s with the explosion of the Situ-influenced British Punk scene and the 1980s in the work of artists such as Hans Haacke, Jeanne-Claude and Christo, Cindy Sherman, Martha Rossler, David Cerny and Tracy Emin to name but a few. While it is in no way possible to reduce the works, practices and gestures of these artists to a single theme, they all sought in their own idiosyncratic way to take up what could only be called a radically negative, polemical posture to the world in general and the art world in particular. And the consequences were often serious, far-reaching and enduring. For example, the controversies that surrounded Andreas Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987) and Robert Mapplethorpe’s ill-fated exhibition *The Perfect Moment* (1989) led to far-reaching and negative policy changes in the National Endowment for the Arts.⁵

Today, it seems that on questions of cultural representations, certain identitarian segments of the Left and the Right have traded places. Now, the alt-right in its weaponization of humour and appropriation of the technique of *détournement* in its production of memes, seems to invoke the anarchic, provocative spirit of Dada and Surrealism albeit as a form of what Marcuse would call “repressive de-sublimation,”⁶ which is, to *tighten* rather than to *loosen* the death-grip of the present over the future (a recent example of this was the US President’s honouring Rush Limbaugh with the Medal of Freedom)⁷. Some segments of the Left, in contrast, articulates a moralistic neo-Zhdanovian line that insists that art must be *politically* correct in order for it to be *aesthetically* correct. Effectively, it enables a form of dictatorship (again neither commissary nor sovereign in Schmittian terms) supposedly grounded in the imagined community constituted by an over-arching “Identity.”

While there are no doubt profound countervailing tendencies, not least the grass roots movement crystallizing around Bernie Sanders’s bid for the Democratic Party’s candidacy, what we have seen, by and large, in response to this long-standing crisis is a sense of melancholy deepening on the Left. If, according to Freud, mourning involves the gradual withdrawal of libido from the lost object, then melancholia entails a subject who turns against itself and guiltily takes on blame for such object loss. What this has entailed of course is an endless turning of elements of the “Left,” broadly understood, against itself, as we saw recently in a demand from certain LGBTQ+ organizations that Bernie Sanders distance himself from the admittedly problematic yet extremely valuable endorsement of MMA fighter and comedian, Joe Rogan.⁸ What seems to elude those who make such calls is that the point of electoral politics is to *win* rather than to lose elections.

In a manner quite consistent with Schmitt’s denigration of the liberal emphasis on discussion and debate as well as the more

politically engaged gesture of “critique” enabled by an open and agonistic public sphere, the identitarian Left increasingly seeks to impose a kind of dictatorship of its own, concerning what is morally permissible and what is not. As with Schmitt, there is a shifting of the terrain from procedural categories to existential ones, from the argumentative articulation of truth claims and counter-claims grounded in logic and the evidence to ontological ones grounded in proprietary claims of owning experience and highly questionable categories of “existence.” In a sense, this is a reanimation of the deep-seated quarrel between categories of “consciousness” and “being.” In the first, art works are adjudicated in their truth and falsity, in the second, the language grants or denies certain groups their very right to exist; epistemology or what can be known, on one hand, and the a priori epistemic violence of speech acts, on the other.

But perhaps it is unfair to use the language of *dictatorship* here? This concern, I think, can be allayed by recognizing that in these cases, it is always a particular that is presented as standing for the whole by way of forceful imposition. It is a small subsection of a given community or identity group that purports to be able to represent—often without deliberation, consultation or will formation—the group *in toto*. But on what grounds, exactly? What of dissenting voices from within the group supposedly represented? Surely, there are no actual democratic mechanisms of representation, no polling, no elections, no votes cast—ultimately no *accountability*—to ensure the adequacy of such representation. No. It is rather simply an arrogation on the part of a community’s representatives to speak on its behalf. The unmediated force of naked assertion suffices.

In the literary world several examples come to mind, not least Vanessa Place⁹ and Walter Kenneth Goldsmith,¹⁰ or closer to home, Sky Gilbert¹¹ and Robert Lepage.¹² These dynamics of course have also shaken the artworld to the core. As I have discussed elsewhere, the open letter written by the mixed-race artist Hannah Black to Dana Schutz (and signed by several others) declared that the painter apparently had “no right” to Black suffering and that her painting ought, by that token, not only to be withdrawn from the Whitney Biennale but in fact destroyed. “That painting must go,” declared Black’s letter. Or perhaps this was its *diktat* meaning, according to the *OED*, “A decree, ruling, or directive; a categorical assertion or prescription.”¹³

Perhaps the best example of such left-wing melancholy can be found in the furore over the Russian-American Communist painter Victor Arnautoff’s mural at George Washington High School in San Francisco. The mural, dating from the early 1930s, was the first of its kind to depict this most iconic of founding fathers in a less than iconic light. It is a twelve panel, meticulously researched work covering all the walls and stairwell of the entrance to the school. The mural is an exemplary instance of a style of fresco that consists in applying paint directly onto wet plaster—called “buon” fresco. The mural took some ten months to complete. What is particularly interesting about the mural is the way it actually centres the enslaved African Americans, working-class revolutionaries and Indigenous peoples while,

at the same time, it marginalizes its subject, George Washington, in a kind of inverted “great man theory of history.” One panel depicts Washington standing over the corpse of an Indigenous person, and enslaved African Americans, while giving orders for the catastrophic westward expansion of the Republic. Criticism, here, would attend to the truth of the mural, its refusal to present a monumental, legitimating account of the shining US “City on upon a Hill.” In contrast to such an account, Arnautoff paints history against the grain so as to reveal the utterly barbaric truth of the American civilizing mission. This is, by any account, exemplar of politically engaged art.

Today, however, as in the case of Hannah Black’s open letter, calls have been made for Arnautoff’s mural to be destroyed because the work fails to depict these oppressed communities in a light that they consider appropriate. Actually, to be more precise, the work fails to depict these communities in ways that the self-appointed representatives might consider appropriate. As mentioned above, it does so in the complete absence of democratic mechanisms. It is a version of the Bolshevik idea of democratic centralism yet without the *democracy*. Of course, one may reasonably agree that there is something about these representations that could be construed as not having aged particularly well, although this, in my opinion, is emphatically not applicable in the case of Arnautoff’s George Washington Mural. Nonetheless, there will be those who reasonably disagree. The answer, as in the case of Dana Schutz’s *Open Casket* (2017), therefore, is *not* to destroy the art works but, rather, to subject them to relentless and ruthless immanent criticism.

We might agree with Adorno who calls for interrogating the work’s dialectical falsity in light of its truth and vice-versa. Here the pertinent question would be: Does the work subvert itself, on the one hand, by intending solidarity with the oppressed, yet, on the other, by presenting them as objects rather than as subjects of history and therefore reifying them in the process. In other words, the work is marked by a historical wound that it opens forcefully but cannot, as it were, close or heal. (Of course, perhaps artworks in late capitalist society can only open and never close wounds insofar as the latter is a matter of political *praxis* in any case.) This, it can be argued, is precisely the role of art criticism and political critique: understanding the fractured unity of the true and the false; sometimes the way in which a work’s very success is dialectically dependent upon its own failure. Perhaps it is because of this alliance between art and political criticism that Joseph Goebbels, in his first act as Minister for Propaganda, outlawed the former in order to annul the latter.

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” Samuel Beckett’s perhaps over-cited locution can be read as a commentary on the very activity of art-making, in which failure is a key, irreducible moment; nothing that can be wished or air-brushed out of history. In other words, an important premise of art criticism is that art works are made in the spirit of experimentation, which means a spirit in which there are simply no *metaphysical* (much less *moral*) guarantees. Art

presupposes an open-ended field that welcomes the experience of the new and the unexpected. Yet, today, as in the field of politics, the multiple crises of our times, the economic, social, political and above all ecological emergencies, lead to an increasing tendency to foreshorten the new and disavow unexpectedly by means of an imposed sovereign madness of decision. Or, in a word: dictatorship.

1. As critics such as Asad Haider and Adolph Reed Jr. suggest, contemporary identity politics functions as a form of neoliberal ideology. See my review of the former’s *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (Verso, 2019) in *Radical Philosophy* 2.04 (Spring, 2019). [On line]: bit.ly/3funqts.
2. Michel Foucault, Preface, in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xi-xiv.
3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alsattair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1986).
4. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 253-264.
5. Serrano’s work is a highly-saturated Cibachrome photograph of a small plastic crucifix submerged in a jar of urine with saturated colours. It caught the attention of Christian organizations in the US who declared that it was “offensive to Christians” and that work like this should not be funded (it had received a \$5000 NEA grant). This was one of the reasons that NEA funding was massively cut by the Ronald Reagan administration.
6. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: A Study in the Ideology of Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
7. Limbaugh is a right-wing radio host who has a large following and for decades has promoted right-wing causes. He has arguably been one of the central instigators of right-wing media that has been instrumental in creating the conditions for the Tea Party and more recently support for Donald J. Trump.
8. In particular, the President of the UK-based Human Rights Campaign said “Given Rogan’s comments, it is disappointing that the Sanders campaign has accepted and promoted the endorsement. The Sanders campaign must reconsider this endorsement and the decision to publicise the views of someone who has consistently attacked and dehumanised marginalised people.” [On line]: bit.ly/2WoYfQ8.
9. See Kim Calder, “The Denunciation of Vanessa Place”, June 14, 2015. [On line]: bit.ly/2K3Wdz0.
10. See Jason Guriel, “A Poet Turned Michael Brown’s Autopsy Report Into Click-Bait as Performance Art”, March 24, 2015. [On line]: bit.ly/3a9hVfN.
11. See Kevin Ritchie, “Buddies in Bad Times cancels reading over ‘highly problematic’ poem”, November 17, 2018. [On line]: bit.ly/2XDgnbg.
12. See Graeme Hamilton, “Controversial Robert LePage show *Kanata* cancelled after co-producers withdraw financial support”, July 26, 2018. [On line]: bit.ly/2XDGwXo.
13. See “Hannah Black’s Letter to the Whitney Biennial’s Curators: Dana Schutz painting ‘Must Go’”, March 22, 2017. [On line]: bit.ly/2RDGZFr; Coco Fusco, “Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz’s Image of Emmett Till”, March 27, 2017. [On line]: bit.ly/2XA5erD; Samir Gandesha, “Insurgent universality”, *Radical Philosophy*, Spring 2019. [On line]: bit.ly/2ybRicW.

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Victor Arnautoff, *Life of George Washington*,
1936. George Washington High School,
San Francisco, California. Photos: Richard Evans.

