



“Don’t Agonise, Organise!”

by Rosi Braidotti

“Think we must”, wrote Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas*, “Let us never cease from thinking—what is this ‘civilisation’ in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them?”. These passionate words urging us to think critically about the price that “we” are prepared to pay for being part of this civilisation, and of the male-dominated institutions that govern it, resonate loud and clear today. They seem as relevant now as when they were first uttered in the 1930’s, at another crucial turning point in our political history.

One always thinks against one’s times, in spite of the times and out of concern for one’s times.

This insight rings painfully true today, as we pick up the pieces of our broken dreams about electing the first woman to the presidency of the USA. As Donna Haraway put it—ever so eloquently—on her Facebook page on November 9, 2016:

“Well, I thought we’d be together battling for a progressive agenda in the context of a neoliberal, partially progressive Clinton administration. I thought climate change and extinction and so much else could be central issues. They must still be. But now we will be together battling fascism, unleashed racism, misogyny, antisemitism, islamophobia, anti-immigration, and so much else. I feel heart broken and re-radicalised.”

The operative word here is “re-radicalise”—trying to cope with this traumatic defeat, acknowledging the pain and learning from our and other people’s mistakes, in order to go on and build a new political praxis. I am reminded immediately of Derrida’s comments on the suicidal character of the democratic system, which echo Nietzsche’s thoughts from the previous century. The sobering awareness that democracy in itself is not enough to save us from its electoral majority is crucial at a historical time when the political momentum seems to be on the side of rising populism. In the 1930’s—Virginia Woolf’s time—far too many people voted “democratically” for the national-socialist movements, for fascist and Nazi leaders who then went on to deprive them of their basic rights and to commit atrocities. The repetition of these tendencies in the western world today makes me wonder whether representative democracy is at all immunised against its own reactionary elements.

I am thinking for instance of the manipulative use that has been made of the referendum as a political instrument, not only in the UK, but also in the Netherlands and Italy. A lot of commentators are currently writing on the uses and abuses of the referendum as a tool of government: isn't representative democracy about allowing our democratically elected representatives to research and pass the suitable legislation to confront the complex issues of the days? Why call a referendum on intricate constitutional or international relations issues? I think it would be far more useful to set up a serious educational programme, backed by a full-scale information campaign, talking to people and fellow citizens, also about difficult subject-matters. I am not at all sure that the media and the social networks are to blame for the mis-information that seems to dominate the public debates. What are we to make of the fact that the so-called advanced economies fall for "post-truth" politics, while a country like South Africa opts for the dialogical model of "Truth & Reconciliation" commissions? Maybe it is time to learn from the South?

The electoral victory of a misogynist, unexperienced and unskilled, white male supremacist like Trump, however, reveals far more than the limitations of representative democracy. What we are witnessing is the return of sexist and racist language and practices in the public sphere, coupled with an instrumental use of ideas like the decline of the West, the crisis and the necessity of state violence in times of emergency. Trump capitalised on the frustrations and fears of the former middle classes, badly hit by the fall-out of economic globalisation. The politics of resentment has quite a long history: Bush himself pursued a similar strategy at the turn of the millennium. Today, new populist movements follow suit, introducing some interesting variations on this old theme.

Contemporary populisms, whether from the Left or from the Right, are the same to me. On the Right of the political spectrum, abstract appeals to sacralised notions of cultural authenticity have replaced or reinforced the rhetoric of blood and soil. Cultural essentialism—or ethno-nationalism—disguised as civic pride, is the refrain of today's Right-wing populism. On the Left of the political spectrum, classes devastated by decades of economic decline and enforced austerity, have endorsed the public expression of "whitelash": white people's—mostly men's—anger, producing a virulent form of neo-nationalist populism. Racist by visceral reflex, isolationist by default, scared at heart, the "neo-nativist" movements, in their urban as well as rural versions, longs for the restoration of an era gone by. They express a sharp sense of threat—of wrongs and injuries translated into political disenchantment and they seem to assume that the only pain that matters in the world is white men's pain. It makes them misogynist, homo- and transphobic, as well as xenophobic. Moreover, all populists—at the far Right just as the far Left—have turned against the European Union, as a trans-national space. Why is it so difficult to imagine a post-nationalist Europe? It would be interesting to compare the different kinds of European populisms and interrogate their representations not only of the nation and of the people, but also of the idea of Europe itself.

I cannot accept either the Rights or the Left-wing versions of populism, as they both brutally re-assert whiteness and male supremacism as core values. Just consider the enthusiastic support that a Left-wing intellectual such as Slavoj Žižek has lent to Donald Trump in the few crucial days before the American election. Žižek's misogyny is well-known, but this time he truly surpassed himself by asserting that Trump is "less dangerous" (to whom? where?) than Clinton. He should be held accountable for it. There is a clear correlation between having or not having access to the resources and advantages of the global economy and the loss of a sense of self-esteem and belonging. But is this enough to plunge us into the abyss of "post-truth" politics?

In the USA as elsewhere, the organised political Left has its share of responsibility to account for. The mistakes of previous generations of leaders and of their old "democratic" coalitions ended up helping the Republicans. Nonetheless, the Right-wing populism of dubious characters such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson is a nauseating form of political manipulation, because it affects most directly those who are economically worse off. These exploitative politicians only "empathise" with the pain and despair of their electorate to the extent that they encourage them to scape-goat their built-up anger onto women, LGBTQ, migrants, foreigners, asylum-seekers and other figures of despised "otherness". The appeal to strong nationalist leaders who basically promise to solve the problems by building more walls around every single constituency produces what Deleuze and Guattari call micro-fascism. Whether they are the Left or the Rights, they are micro-fascists. How many new walls have gone up since the Berlin wall came down? Fortress Europe is one of them, and that's our immediate and direct responsibility.

In a philosophical perspective, it is almost inevitable to interpret these events through the lenses of Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche. We find ourselves in a "democratic" political regime where factual truths play no role at all: in the Brexit, as in the Trump campaign, people were shamelessly lied to. What mattered most to them was the expression of negative emotions and violent passions, like hatred, intolerance, rage, cynicism and opportunism. As a teacher, I believe firmly that my task is to fight untruths and injustices with the instrument of critical reason, but also by speaking truth to power both in classrooms, and in the public sphere. Lies are lies, no matter how many may actually believe them, or much backing they get from the powers-that-be. It is important to advance a radical critique of the vulnerability of representative democracy as a system, starting from two main sources. On the one hand a critical re-appraisal of collective action aimed at affirmative forms of social and ethical interaction and the respect for freedom, and on the other hand the historical experiences of feminisms. We need to move beyond dialectical oppositions, beyond the logic of violent antagonism, to develop an operational politics of affirmation. This requires accurate political cartographies of the power relations that we inhabit and by which we are structured. That's hard work.

Violence, pain and resentment are conducive to paralysis, not to change. I am even more convinced of this the day after Trump's victory. More than ever we

need forms of political opposition that are rich in alternatives, concrete in propositions and attached to everyday projects. This is not a simple or pain-free process, of course, but anger alone is not a project, as Hillary Clinton so lucidly put it. Anger needs to be transformed into the power to act; it needs to become a constitutive force addressed not only “against”, but also in favour of something. It is obvious that Trump and Johnson represent the pit of negativity of our era and that, faced by their dishonesty and violence, we will echo Deleuze and say: “No, thank you, we would prefer not to” follow you. The crucial question however is: who and how many are “we”? “We” may well be against the alliance of neoliberalism with multiple fundamentalisms, but we need to compose together a plane of agreement about what our shared hopes and aspirations are. We need to agree on what we want to build together as an alternative. Critique and creation work hand-in-hand.

Even more so in the current context, with its xenophobic rhetoric of the state of emergency, governance by fear and perpetual warfare. In the western world the defence of women’s and LGBTQ’s human rights seems to be a last resort, for instance when we are confronted by the rise of violence against women, rapes included; or after the mass murder in Orlando, Florida. Far too often feminist and LGBTQ causes are enlisted in a civilisational discourse that manipulates them in order to assert the alleged supremacy of the west over the rest: emphasis on human rights as a pretext for war and occupation. Within the same western world, however, the resurgence of neo-fundamentalism induces new, subtler but not less violent forms of exclusion and discrimination. They are articulated around the axes of ethnicity and whiteness, gender and sexuality but also around dominant cultural values such as youth and slimness, health, able-bodiedness and access to advanced technologies, to name only some of the components that define the complex phenomenon of contemporary “class” differences.

Postcolonial and race theories have been challenging white privileges for decades, arguing for the need to undo racialised hierarchies and to question the ethnocentric assumptions about what constitutes the basic unit of reference for being human. They join forces with feminist and gender studies to bring home a simple point: that we are not all vulnerable in the same way or to the same extent, and that no group has the monopoly over pain and social exclusion. Non-male, non-white, non-heteronormative, but also non-anthropomorphic beings know on their bodies what it means to be exposed to all sorts of fundamentalisms, racisms and reactionary politics.

Thus, while denouncing the exacerbation of misogyny, racism and cynicism in the present political context, I want to repeat the question I asked before: who and how many are “we”? To what an extent can “we” say that “we” are in this together? I want to express solidarity, while avoiding hasty re-compositions of one “humanity” bonded in fear and vulnerability. I prefer to defend complexity and multiple ways of being human, that is to say an affirmative definition of what binds us together. I think it important, for instance, in the era of the Anthropocene, to see the close links between neoliberal economic politics and a

system of dis-enfranchisements and exclusion of entire layers of both the human population and the non-human agents of our planet.

The way to handle these issues is to start from the project of composing a “we” that is grounded, accountable and active. This is the collective praxis of affirmative politics, which Spinoza encourages us to embrace against the toxic negativity of the social context. In the midst of our technologically mediated social relations and in response to the paranoid rhetoric of our post-truth democratic leaders, how can we labour together to construct affirmative ethical and political practices? How can we work towards socially sustainable horizons of hope through resistance? What tools can we use to resist nihilism, escape consumeristic individualism and get immunised against xenophobia? The answer is in the doing, in the praxis of composing alliances, transversal connections and in engaging in difficult conversations on what troubles us. “We” need to re-radicalise ourselves.

And it is high time that the Left—or what is left of the Left—listens respectfully and seriously to the thought and the practices of feminists, LGBTQ’s, anti-racists and trans-national justice movements. It is time to re-radicalise also the politicians on the Left, by making them understand the enduring effects of their own sexism and their violent dismissal of feminist affirmative politics.

“We philosophers” have at hand powerful theoretical models: from Spinoza to Donna Haraway, from Foucault to Deleuze. And “we feminists” have rich practical precedents as well: from Olympe de Gouges to Hillary Clinton, from *Riot grrrl* to *Pussy Riot*, via the cyborg-eco-feminists, the Xeno-feminists, the anti-racist and the post-anthropocentric activists. They constitute a multitude of “bad girls” aspiring to self-determination, capable of triggering new social imaginaries and igniting unexpected political passions. These sources of inspiration for alternative forms of subjectivity are built on affirmative praxis. They teach us that resistance to the violence and injustice of the present requires the creation of modes of affirmative relation and of ethical interaction—that is to say of alternative communities—based on the pursuit of shared desires for transformative politics and social justice. So don’t agonise, organise, because there is just so much that needs to be done.

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