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Hermeneutic Communism and the Challenge of ‘Radical Hospitality’

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Based on Heidegger’s critique of subject metaphysics, *Hermeneutic Communism* argues for a politics originating from the margins, at the heart of which is the care for the weak. Providing a political dimension to Heidegger’s notion of disclosure (*Entbergung*), the authors call for a paradigm change in liberal democracies where entire segments of society (‘the weak’) experience the effects of their metaphysical foundations as violence. The solution, however, is not the promise of utopian communism because, being itself a foundationalist enterprise, it would replicate similar forms of oppression. Rather, in order to address the systemic problems plaguing liberal democracies (as a result of individualism, capitalism), Vattimo and Zabala propose not an overcoming (*Überwindung*) but a distorting, a twisting (*Verwindung*) of democratic foundations *from the margins*, that is, from within liberal democracies.

In my paper, I show how the practice of *Verwindung*, as laid out by Vattimo and Zabala, might be conceived as formulating a politics of the gap between the ethical and political dimension Derrida uncovers in Kant’s notion of hospitality.

‘How do we act hospitably now?’ This question as well as the Radical Hospitality stream itself grew more or less directly out of Derrida’s lectures and reflections on what he calls the aporia, antinomy, or the double-bind implied by the concept of hospitality. In a number of texts from the late 1990s and early 2000s, Derrida explored these aporias that stem from the fact that any application of the concept of hospitality implies simultaneously a conditional (local) law as well as an unconditional (universal) law of hospitality.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, Derrida is very clear that the aporia should not mislead one to assume

¹⁰⁴ Jacques Derrida: “Hostipalité,” *Cogito* 85 (1999): 17-44; Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); JD, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

that practices of hospitality are not desirable or impossible; quite the contrary. I therefore understand the formulation ‘radical hospitality’ as a reminder to remain cognizant of the aporetic nature of hospitality so as not to assume that any particular content will satisfy the concept. In this paper I would like to relate Derrida’s conceptual analysis to what may be seen as a blueprint for a political application of the concept of hospitality. The text I have in mind is entitled *Hermeneutic Communism* (2011) and is co-authored by Italian philosophers Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala.

Assuming that there is less familiarity with this text than with Derrida’s, I will begin by outlining, in very broad terms, the principal claims of *Hermeneutic Communism*. In a second step, I will test to what extent Derrida’s analyses are addressed in Vattimo and Zabala’s approach. The question I would like to explore is in what way – if indeed at all – Derrida’s aporetic formulation of hospitality can be shown to be compatible with a socio-political project of hospitality such as the one suggested in *Hermeneutic Communism*.

Hermeneutic Communism

Vattimo and Zabala’s text from 2011 is an impassioned philosophical appeal to redress the plight of those left behind by the neoliberal policies of the past few decades, and to whom they refer as the losers of globalization or, in more drastic terms, the ‘discharge of the West.’¹⁰⁵ In the course of their argument, the authors explore existing alternatives to Western – especially American-style – capitalism, which they see as imbued with fantasies of world dominion. They discover such alternatives, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, in Latin America in the countries led by Castro, Chavez and Morales. While I have much sympathy for the authors’ impassioned advocacy for those left behind by the global economic policies of the West, I have my doubts (albeit with hindsight) as to the well-foundedness of the policies of some of their heroes. But this is not my subject. Rather, I am concerned with the politico-philosophical framework of *Hermeneutic Communism*. In this text, Vattimo and Zabala make an impassioned appeal to stand up for the excluded; their appeal is radical and so are the philosophical underpinnings of their approach.

¹⁰⁵ Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism. From Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

In order to take the full measure of the book's argument we have to begin with the philosophy of 'weak thought,' or *pensiero debole*, that Vattimo has been formulating since the early 1970s.¹⁰⁶ For, in some sense, *Hermeneutic Communism*, authored by him and one of his students, can be seen as the theoretical and practical culmination of Vattimo's oeuvre.

The hallmark of weak thought is its theoretical anti-foundationalism, a philosophical attitude which, in the wake of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the different post-structuralisms, is suspicious of all thought that derives the truthfulness of its statements from an unshakable ground (*fundamentum absolutum inconcussum veritatis*) – be it called God, Nature, the Subject, History, Science, or the Party. For Vattimo and Zabala, notions of unshakable grounds merely occlude hidden interests, designed to first establish and then safeguard regimens of truth. With Heidegger and Derrida, Vattimo labels this entire Western tradition metaphysics: 'the idea that an objective order exists independently from us and to which we ought to conform in order to know (mirroring) and act (rights and 'natural' ethics).'¹⁰⁷ In response to such ideas, Vattimo's philosophy of weak thought does not offer an unshakable ground. Instead, it is content with being an interpretation – the 'hermeneutic' of the title – whose sole aim is to present a different perspective, i.e., a new interpretation led by a declared interest with respect to the matter at hand. For over forty years, Vattimo's weak thought has been concerned with formulating this anti-foundationalist alternative to the Western tradition.

While Vattimo joins a number of fellow travellers in this critique of metaphysics – Derrida, Lyotard and Rorty come to mind – weak thought represents his own particular brand of such post-metaphysical thought. Vattimo calls his approach an 'ontology of actuality,'¹⁰⁸ by which he means to signal that his critical analysis of the Western

¹⁰⁶ There is no single text of Vattimo's that could function as *pars pro toto* to capture the unfolding of his philosophy of weak thought from the early 1970s to around 1996. However, Vattimo's *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, & Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), introduced by Richard Rorty, provides a comprehensive overview of the nature and range of Vattimo's thought.

¹⁰⁷ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 94.

¹⁰⁸ Gianni Vattimo, "Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality. A biographical-theoretical interview with Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone" *Iris. European Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2009, 311-350.

world (and its intellectual and socio-political reproduction *in toto*) derives from the hermeneutic approach to the present historical epoch. The post-metaphysical epoch is defined by the end of strong foundational claims or metanarratives, and it is the work of weak thought to interrogate all foundational discourses as to their hidden interests. In particular, Vattimo never tires of criticizing how the West assures and reassures itself of its unshakable metaphysical ground through regimens of truth based on logic, reason, and experimental science. Vattimo's position is not that the sciences furnish untruth; rather, he is dismayed that they present their approach as the only viable (because objectively true) way to explain events. In Vattimo's view, scientific truths can count as true interpretations only from within the frameworks that have been used to establish them. But the frameworks used are far from being the only ones possible.

With this background we can turn from the philosophy of weak thought to the main argument of *Hermeneutic Communism*. In this text, Vattimo and Zabala develop a concrete socio-political alternative to neoliberalism from within their hermeneutic critique of Western metaphysics. At its centre is the critique of objectivism (or what they call a realist metaphysics), i.e., the approach that rationalises all Being as conceived by a timeless all-powerful Subject describing its Object. In this critique of objectivism they take their cue from Heidegger: 'Insofar as the *pure relationship of the I-think-unity* (basically a tautology) becomes the unconditional relationship, *the present that is present to itself* becomes the measure of all beingness.'¹⁰⁹ In other words, the truth promoted by the sciences necessarily conceives of the present state of objects as their essential nature. Vattimo and Zabala reject this realist or objectivist ontology as metaphysics. In its stead, they defend the anti-foundationalist hermeneutic position described above.

Now, what is new in *Hermeneutic Communism* is the political thrust of this hermeneutic ontology, for it allows the authors to advance a radical critique of contemporary socio-political reality. They suggest that objectivist metaphysics validates the status quo and as such is essentially conservative, i.e., it is inherently resistant to change, especially radical change. This is so because science, in describing what it encounters as objective, obscures the vested interests

¹⁰⁹ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 13.

underlying its interpretive operation. Once these vested interests, and their stabilizing function, are illuminated, the conservative nature of science is revealed. Again, the results generated by science are not wrong, but they are not the only ones possible. This is what metaphysics forgets, and it is this forgetting that turns science into a conservative force, supportive of the status quo. The hermeneutic approach, on the other hand, knows and affirms itself as an interpretation, aware that its unscientific (in the sense of not claiming an ultimate ground) claim to truth may well be provisional. The point of its truth claims is therefore to present alternative scenarios to the status quo – to interfere with what is, and to change it in the direction it favours.

This takes us to the second term of Vattimo and Zabala's text: communism. This term does not reference a nostalgia for any historical instances of real-existing communism; rather, it attempts to go back to the spirit of actively interfering in perceived injustices on the grounds of human solidarity. Even if notions of class war have lost their purchase, the injustices that first created them are still with us. Vattimo and Zabala point out that little has changed when it comes to 'the rich' and 'the poor,' the 'winners' and 'losers' of modern capitalism and of globalization. Not unlike Frankfurt School philosophers, they see the contemporary world as an administered society run by technocratic rule for which they coin the term 'framed democracy.'¹¹⁰ In their view, Western democracies have congealed, in economic, political, and military terms, into conservative formations that lack any sense of empathy for the fate of the marginalized people(s) within and without the West.

In summation, then, the political critique levelled by *Hermeneutic Communism* is not launched from a *fundamentum absolutum inconcussum*, an ultimate ground for a just political practice. Rather, its authors conceive of political action as hermeneutic performance in a universe of interpretations for which no ultimate arbiter exists. It is from within this postmodern anti-foundationalism that Vattimo and Zabala present their interpretation of how to safeguard the weak. They try to gain access to a realm that leaves truth as correspondence behind and moves to truth as interpretation. In this fashion, *Hermeneutic*

¹¹⁰ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 7

Communism turns the ‘hermeneutic ontology’¹¹¹ of weak thought into a political philosophy for the marginalized.

Radical Hermeneutics and Radical Hospitality

As we saw, *Hermeneutic Communism* is driven by a political critique of existing liberalism and neoliberalism. But unlike regular political critiques, it is launched without a platform based on an ultimate ground, such as a substantial vision of freedom, justice, or the pursuit of happiness. Because Vattimo and Zabala attempt to leave metaphysics behind, they cannot identify an ultimate ground or a certain set of laws as binding for all – as scientific communism assumed it could – and legitimate all action performed in its name.

In their model, the power of the weak and their allies consists in affirming a different interpretation of the status quo by protesting against their fate in the neoliberal world. In the hermeneutic universe of interpretation no foundational discourse can disqualify this appeal by the weak. Rather, the hermeneutic approach offers an open horizon to any appeal at any time. It is in this structural openness to the future – or so I would like to claim – that Vattimo and Zabala’s hermeneutic communism can be related to the aporetic notion of hospitality as advanced by Emmanuel Levinas and Derrida. Although the following statement will have to be qualified in due course, for heuristic purposes I might put my argument this way: hermeneutic ontology is to metaphysics what radical hospitality is to the particular laws of hospitality. As we saw above, in *Of Hospitality*, Derrida presented two readings of the concept of hospitality, one conditional, the other unconditional. My claim is that the conception of radical hermeneutics, like that of radical hospitality, is defined by an open horizon that is, in the final analysis, conditioned by the ethical brotherhood of humankind. Derrida explicates the openness of the horizon through the conceptual analysis of the structural encounter with the stranger, while Vattimo and Zabala use the notion of horizon to condemn the shortcomings of ‘framed democracies’ inside and outside the Western world. Ultimately, the motivation for Vattimo and Zabala’s critique of the objectivist notion of truth and in favour of the care for the ‘discharge of the West,’ is rooted in a feeling of

¹¹¹ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 93.

ethical responsibility. As such, it is another word for unconditional love, or the ideal of basic human solidarity where distinctions of nation, language, creed, and custom are null and void.

This sentiment is at the bottom of Vattimo and Zabala's radical hermeneutics which, like the notion of radical hospitality, represents an appeal, not a ground. Giving voice to this appeal takes the form of interpretations that are always provisional. Most important for Vattimo's philosophy of weak thought, however, is the fact that radical hermeneutics does not legitimate violence. Rather, it takes the form of a utopian project. The question is if Derrida's structural reading of radical hospitality can be read as supporting such a utopian project or not.

Difference

The notion of horizon, then, is decisive for both Derrida's and Vattimo and Zabala's approaches. However, their respective horizons are developed from within very different theoretical frameworks, i.e., *hermeneutics* as the philosophy of interpretation and *deconstruction* as the critical idiom exploring the limits of conceptual thought. Derrida's conceptual investigation uncovers an unresolvable aporia at the very heart of the structure of hospitality – which at first sight hardly makes him a viable candidate for a political project.

To recall some aspects of this aporia quickly: according to Derrida there are two orders of law when it comes to hospitality. On the one hand, there is the unconditional, ethical law of hospitality that enjoins all of us to treat the stranger as if s/he were us. On the other hand, there are the local laws of hospitality as they exist in a bounded space – such as a state, a nation, or a home that, for pragmatic reasons, restrict unconditional hospitality. The aporia consists in the fact that the law of radical hospitality can only ever be realized in historical laws grounded in real circumstances that necessarily restrict it. Furthermore, the institutions granting 'hospitable' space must, in order to safeguard it, develop safety requirements that take the form of laws to be enforced by police, aspects that further control and restrict hospitality while granting the limits of its possibility. What is more, the very notion of hospitality contains in it the idea of a space in which to grant hospitality, and within which the owner of that space necessarily has authority over the stranger. Structurally, in other

words, hospitality can only appear in aporetic fashion, as both conditional and unconditional. In Derrida, we therefore confront not a utopian project but rather a structural conundrum. Thus, although they share the anti-foundational attitude and a concern for unconditional human solidarity, hermeneutics and deconstruction seem to part ways when it comes to turning such similar premises into a political project – quite in spite of what Vattimo and Zabala at least implicitly suggest by enlisting Derrida’s support in their critique of actually existing neoliberalism.

And yet I would like to suggest that we take a closer look *at the manner* in which Vattimo and Zabala articulate their utopian project and how they imagine the nature of hermeneutic communism. For the issue may come down to how they conceptualize ‘communism’s weakened essence.’¹¹² Put differently, the question is what a weakened communism, a ‘communism without dominion,’¹¹³ a non-foundational communism, actually looks like.

In the last chapter of *Hermeneutic Communism* the authors state: ‘Weak communism is the political alternative to the neoliberal impositions of framed democracies.’¹¹⁴ At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Vattimo and Zabala find such weak communism realized in a number of Latin American countries. Elected on a democratic platform, the policies of Chavez and Morales – such as the distribution of the proceeds from oil sales into general health programmes, as well as free medical and educational programmes that drastically reduced extreme poverty, infant mortality, and illiteracy¹¹⁵ – ought to be seen as successful examples of weak communist political programmes. However, rather than regard such policies, which they emphatically support, as truths to be exported around the globe, Vattimo and Zabala treat them as falsifiable *interpretations* that, given the open horizon of hermeneutics, may have to be overturned at a later point. Overturned, that is, if I might put this in the language of Derrida’s investigations, in light of the continually retreating law of unconditional hospitality, which

¹¹² Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 113.

¹¹³ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 119.

¹¹⁴ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 128.

¹¹⁵ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 125.

constitutes the categorical imperative of hermeneutic praxis. In this spirit, Vattimo and Zabala maintain:

While we cannot imagine a world where communism is completed, neither can we renounce this ideal as a regulative and inspiring principle for our concrete decisions. But wouldn't we lose in this way the meaning of the regulative ideal? Kant's lesson of practical reason also has this meaning: the union between virtue and happiness is not only the end that gives meaning to moral actions but also something impossible to carry out in the world. Nevertheless, this impossibility does not remove the obligation toward the categorical imperative. In sum, communism is utopia or, as Benjamin would say, a project of the '*weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim.'¹¹⁶

I believe one can interpret this paragraph as being in line if not with the letter at least with the spirit of Derrida's investigation into the aporias of the concept of hospitality. Vattimo and Zabala state here explicitly that the completion of communism – which would be akin to the realization of unconditional hospitality – is impossible to imagine, which I read as impossible to achieve. Yet a non-foundational, weak communism continues to function as a regulative principle for daily decisions to be made, similar to the role played by the unconditional law of hospitality for the particular laws of hospitality. That is to say, the obligation toward the categorical imperative remains, although its realization may forever be postponed.

So how do we act hospitably now? By being mindful that heeding the appeal coming from the categorical imperative is both impossible (in the end) and necessary. Both Derrida's aporia and Vattimo and Zabala's 'hermeneutic communism' point that way. The above quote continues:

The messianic power of the utopia is also a critical and indispensable limit; it is only when the revolution is considered completed (or, which is the same, when Being is identified with beings as a present fact) that it becomes despotic power,

¹¹⁶ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 117.

hegemony, and violence against any disclosure toward a different future.¹¹⁷

The notion of utopia as indispensable limit, as continuous revolution producing provisional results to be improved upon at a later time, is to apply the appeal of the unconditional law of hospitality to the local laws of hospitality.

¹¹⁷ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 117.