

The Eternal Return of Revolt:

A Conversation

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Interview by Ill Will Editions

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ILL WILL EDITIONS: *In your work, you have expressed an interest in thinking a “politics against politics”, namely, a form of political experience, action and thinking asymmetrical with the professional forms of ‘classical politics’ in the West. The George Floyd Rebellion has combined various orders of political action, from symbolic protest-style marches to ballistic clashes with police officers, the destruction of state owned and corporate property through trashing, burning, and looting, as well as the occupation of public spaces and the push for “autonomous zones.” We have the feeling that it is a mistake to lazily conflate all of these different elements into one big “social movement”. Amongst friends, we refer instead to the initial phase of the rebellion, marked by the material attack on capitalist and state infrastructure as the “real movement”, which then (as happened already with Ferguson) devolved or was recuperated into the form of a “social movement” that coheres more tightly with the interests and agendas of established NGO’s and leftist protest managers. This devolution is uneven, of course, and we’ve seen flare ups of the ‘real movement’ amidst the process, for instance in Atlanta, Richmond VA and New York, where riots have continued. But overall the trend seems to be for the real movement to be supplanted by the social movement. How can your idea of a “politics against politics” help us parse and differentiate the current cycle of struggle into its different elements?*

The concept of politics against politics is, in many ways, the beating heart of my work. That has been true from the beginning, since my first book on transgressive counterpublics and the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico.¹ One way to elaborate on the concept and your question would be through what the Latin American thinker Enrique Dussel calls “the political field.”² On the political field, Dussel finds the following three figures: *potestas*, *potentia*, and *hyperpotentia*. *Potestas* refers to the whole institutional apparatus of politics, including the police, prisons, courts, military, etc. *Potentia* refers to the heterogeneous array of people outside of potestas. The people of *potentia* are almost everyone on Earth, since *potentia* is composed of everyone outside the political class. Then there is *hyperpotentia*, which refers to the various states of rebellion and revolt that break out when sectors of *potentia* rise up to confront and contest the powers of potestas.

On Dussel’s political field, the institutional apparatus of politics is just one factor. The problem is what Dussel calls the “fetishization of power.”³ Our pathological attraction to seeing the head of state as the locus of power leads us to think of political power as the private property of the formal institutions of government. When we think the political we therefore think of heads of state and the political class. Dussel warns against this as a corruption that fixes political discourse to elections, public policy, and concepts of justice that pass through the courts. One could say that “politics against politics” means, first of all, breaking the fetishization of the power of the political class. Opposed to their form of politics are the active upheavals of *hyperpotentia*.

In my work, I generally agree with this, although unlike Dussel, I want to push *potestas* off the field as such. I insist that *potestas* is the private property of capital, which means that the governments of the world are in fact already governed by capital and have been for a long time. Essentially, C. Wright Mills was right in 1956 to

diagnose the entrenchment of the power elite; we have been living under grotesque permutations of his theory ever since.⁴ So, to speak of *potestas* is to speak of the toolbox of capital. Therefore, the politics that have always interested me most are the ones that materialize abolitionist forces from below. According to political science, these forces are only ever pre-political because they merely aspire to become “real politics.” According to some within radical milieus, these forces are called post-political to highlight their abandoned hope in *potestas*. But I don’t think we should simply allow our enemies to have the concept of politics entirely to themselves. It cannot be left to them, so we have to think of a politics against politics. This means that we have to find other ways of mobilizing our disaffections than to channel them into legible demands for the established powers of *potestas*. In the register of legible demands, every protest against capitalist power is either translated into something acceptable to capitalist power, or else it is discarded as irrational violence. Contrary to this, politics against politics means shifting from asking the political class to do something to refuting its power directly; it means experimenting with politics outside of and against the institutional apparatus of politics.

This is all rather abstract, which is where you end up with any kind of categorical rubric. So it is helpful to consider the present cycle of struggle in the US. We could say that the uprisings sparked by the murder of George Floyd mark a passage from *potentia* to *hy-perpotentia*. That is true, but what we find in the current uprisings is, as you point out, a range of very different things. And some of those things are ultimately fettered to *potestas*. For example, calls for justice for George Floyd that center on the state’s punishment of the police do not break the fetishization of power. Demands for non-lethal weaponry and body cameras may be helpful, but they are fundamentally conservative initiatives despite the fact that they sometimes announce themselves in the streets. What is more inter-

esting, and more dangerous from the point of view of capitalist power, are some of the other things: calls to defund the police mark the passageway to a more abolitionist position; riots and revolt including property destruction, or looting; the CHOP/CHAZ commune in Seattle. I think that a lot of what is happening in this cycle of revolt does contain some real threats to the existing state of things, which must be abolished.

So yes, lazy conflation is dangerous. We should not defend all #BLM activity as if it were totally pacifist in order to calm the fears of those who are afraid of “violence.” Such people accept the everyday quotidian violence of white supremacy and capitalism. They have no visible opposition to looters like AT&T, or to the long history of looted labor. Guy Debord understood some of the crucial points well fifty-five years ago, while thinking about the 1965 uprising in Watts, Los Angeles:

“Looting is a natural response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance. It instantly undermines the commodity as such, and it also exposes what the commodity ultimately implies: the army, the police and the other specialized detachments of the state’s monopoly of armed violence. What is a policeman? He is the active servant of the commodity, the man in complete submission to the commodity, whose job is to ensure that a given product of human labor remains a commodity, with the magical property of having to be paid for... In rejecting the humiliation of being subject to police, the blacks are at the same time rejecting the humiliation of being subject to commodities.”⁵

Debord’s brilliant analysis was and remains useful, although it is agonizing that it requires fresh repetition decade after decade.

But at the same time, we should be careful about a different

kind of conflation which would see the George Floyd uprisings as “the initial phase of the rebellion.” Yes, it is a phase of rebellion, but it is not an initial phase. It is a resumption of revolt that had been interrupted. It is not quite right to say that revolt interrupts everyday life. I think it is fair to say that everyday life interrupts the revolt, the latter of which is ongoing in a sporadic and discontinuous history of struggle.

The concept of a politics against politics is helpful inasmuch as it deepens our understanding and appreciation of the limits of the official institutions of politics, which are now being fetishized by the right and the left in very dangerous ways. While politics against politics can help us to distinguish the demand for greater police accountability from the call for police abolition, it cannot help us differentiate other elements in the current cycle of struggle, such as what differentiates property destruction from looting or an occupation from a commune. But politics against politics does help us to look around for power, to look at each other, instead of always looking up at some kind of Hobbesian Leviathan. We should remember that the original fourteenth century idea of the Leviathan was as a sea monster or Satan, not from above, but from below.

You’ve suggested that “if the sense and sensibility of capital is what we oppose, let us become capital’s non-sense, its opposite sensibility.” By contrast, the well-known claim that “riots are the language of the unheard” has once again been trotted out in response to the George Floyd rebellions. Is it correct to think of acts such as rioting, looting, and fighting the police as a language? If so, what is communicated therein, and to whom? Is it a good idea to view language as fundamentally communicative? If so, must we broaden our view of ‘communication’? Or, is language perhaps better thought of as occupied enemy territory, a field ruled by dominant forces that conducts power to and across us through nonlinguistic illocutionary factors, as Deleuze and Guattari (following

Canetti) famously argued? If the latter, does it make sense to treat riots as 'communicative', or should we question the allegedly communicative function of discourse as doing something other than merely communicating,— maybe it's more about disciplining and controlling us? For instance, we can look at the way the media and Trump speak of the riots: it's fairly obvious that they have little interest in understanding them, but move directly to dividing and splitting them into 'good and bad' protestors, the better to marginalize and repress the fighting forces with these currents? In brief, how are we to parse power and speech, action and meaning, in the current moment? How does what you've called a 'philosophy from below' approach these questions?

Yes. We must not strive to make sense according to the logic of capital. If we follow that logic, we can only hope to make sense by presenting measurable results for every action, like citing a policy change in exchange for a protest. The social and political sciences love to measure efficacy that way, such that the current Black-led revolt could only prove its worth if it changes laws. In order to become legible, in order to become sensible, we have to make sense to a cable news anchor who wants us to tell them what we want Trump to do about it. It is better to confuse than to satisfy such logic. It is completely offensive to conclude that the so-called Arab Spring is entirely defeated by the failure of Morsi, or that the Greek revolts are proven false by the limits of Tsipris. No! We have to consider what happens to people, and especially to young people, when they participate in a revolt. Hope can be scarce for good reasons. Not only because of capitalist insecurity, but also because of pandemics and ecological catastrophe, among other things. Nobody thinks they will end racism by burning a cop car. But people are changed by the experience of revolt. Listen to what they say. They are fed up and fighting back. They are experimenting with their own powers, their creative capabilities to fight the reality that threatens them. These

existential, cultural, psychic, historic, and political experiences are not nothing. They may end up being everything in the long run.

On the question of reading the revolts or riots, I have always held that we must not convert them into legible texts. No! Martin Luther King Jr.'s claim that "riots are the language of the unheard" is important, but not because he likens the riot to language. It is important because he is telling an audience in Michigan in 1968 that they must not see in the upheaval nothing but inchoate irrationality and barbaric stupidity. That is not only how many people thought in 1968, but still to this day. People who are not communists and anarchists still repeat the old strategic reduction of revolt to irrational violence. For me, the point was never about language. That is how Hamid Dabashi wrote about the Arab Spring, but I do not agree with him.⁶ The uprisings do not need to be translated into a university essay. Impoverished Black people in the US know what they are experiencing, thinking, and expressing. When I write about reason and revolt, what I am saying is not that the protest needs to speak a language, but that we need to learn how to understand other ways of speaking. But speaking is only one part of it. Sure, we could say that rioting, looting, and fighting the police are expressions of disaffection, proclamations of indignation and rage. But they are not merely "communiqués." To say so would be to misunderstand the importance of the passage from *potentia* to *hyperpotentia*, the passage from the normal violence of capitalist society to the open revolt against it.

On the question of communication, I resist presenting everything that we like as some kind of perfectly rational "communicative action." For Habermas, much like Kant his father, the riot doesn't count. So you could draw that line anywhere to include what you like and exclude what you don't. But revolts do have something to say, and the vast mass of society outside them (the rest of *potentia*) needs to listen and learn. You cannot simply erase all communicative

content for theoretical reasons. It is in there as part of the revolt. So, what I would say is that the revolt exceeds language.

Consider an example. When the Zapatistas made their rebellion in 1994, there had been roughly seventy years of PRI rule in Mexico. The indigenous people in the mountains had been communicating to the Mexican state and to the people of Mexico in conventional language for decades. Yet few heard them beyond the bounds of Chiapas. As was discussed in those days, they lived in oblivion. So, they found other ways to speak through the rebellion, and people in Mexico suddenly had epiphanies about “the indigenous problem” that they never knew existed. This shows that we must exceed linguistic communication, not conform to it. This is why I have recently written about art and insurrection, about non-textual expressions.⁷ And of course, the Zapatistas did not only speak. They also built worlds to live inside of up in the mountains. The making of new worlds always includes and exceeds language.

So I should be clear that with my concept of philosophy from below I am talking about a very particular communist notion of theory, one that I try to develop and defend in my work. Against the idea that the great philosophies always issue from the heads of men like Hegel, I claim that the most provocative questioning of the reality and justice of the world (the classical purview of philosophy) comes better through the revolt than the philosophical text.

You've resisted the tendency to treat revolts as “discrete events” that start at X moment in time at Y place, last a while, then either fizzle out or are crushed. Instead, you see each new revolt as “taking up unfinished business from within the society, from where previous revolts left off.” This links revolts to one another along a sort of volcanic line, where each connects with, responds to, and continues the ‘work’ that others had done. This also allows us to frame revolt as a ‘specter’ that ‘haunts’ society in the interim, and against which state and extra-state forces of

order continuously mobilize counter-insurgency in order to anticipate and quash them, just as leftist and liberal organizations continuously attempt to siphon off and capture the social energies of revolt and “convert them into a platform for their own political strategies,” i.e., for the building of their parties and what not. How, amidst these different contending forces, can the energy of revolt carry itself forward after the crest of clashes and battles subsides? How can revolt keep itself alive in the interim, while resisting the forces that seek to flatten or co-opt it?

When we treat revolts as discrete events that start on one date and end on another, we misunderstand them. We cut them off from a long history of struggle. In my 2016 book, *Specters of Revolt*, I wrote that “The Ferguson revolt did not take place; the Baltimore revolt is proof.” This was said in the context of a *détournement* of Deleuze and Guattari’s essay “May ’68 Did Not Take Place.” Today, we must say that the Baltimore revolt did not take place; the George Floyd uprisings are proof. The statement that says the event did not take place means that it was not over when it appeared to have ended. The current wave of revolt is connected with the previous wave, and theory can help us to see that connective tissue. Why would anyone expect the revolt to end if the conditions of existence that it contests remain fully intact? How could we expect the revolt to find a conclusion amidst the continuation of the conditions that give rise to it? That is why I argue that when the revolt is not visibly and actively happening, its specter still haunts.

To return to Dussel, we could say that the possibility of *hy-perpotentia* always haunts the law and order of *potestas* and *potentia*. That is why the forces of law and order make plans for revolt even in its absence. The hospitals of the world are now making plans for the next pandemic, which they fully expect to come.

Regarding the social energies of revolt, this is a serious question. The channeling of revolutionary or insurrectionary energies

into leftist and liberal organizations is always a risk, as we have seen with what I would call the *Jacobin* wing of the Democratic Party in the US. There is a lot of good content in that social energy, and its energetic expressions during the Bernie Sanders campaign tell us that capitalist white supremacy is not in fact what everyone desires. But it is long past the deadline when we should expect any real gains through existing capitalist institutions. They suck up and swallow everything good that we give them, and then flush it into their sewers. On the other hand, our own subterranean and more radical alternatives to the mainstream institutions of the left, with all of their rhizomatic hopes, do not mobilize anything at the scale of the Sanders campaign. What I want to say is that this is not an organizational problem with an organizational solution.

We should go back to Rosa Luxemburg's essay on "The Mass Strike."⁸ Luxemburg argues that the "rigid, mechanical-bureaucratic conception cannot conceive of the struggle save as the product of organization at a certain stage of its strength." But in fact, the organizations must come out of the uprisings, Luxemburg argues, which she observed "in Russia, where a proletariat almost wholly unorganized created a comprehensive network of organizational appendages in a year-and-a-half of stormy revolutionary struggle." Luxemburg insists that we "cannot keep historical events in check while making recipes for them."


Luxemburg makes two crucial points here. First, existing organizations should be ready and able to aid and abet uprisings when they happen, to follow the uprisings, not lead them. Second, when uprisings are sustained over a long period of time, they generate organizations along the way. In this way, I think that organizations, including the formation of parties and unions, are very important, but they have to come out of real movements and follow the lead of actual struggles in the world. Raya Dunayevskaya later developed some of Luxemburg's ideas into a critique of state capitalism in Rus-

sia that more resolutely grounded every major advance in the real and seemingly spontaneous uprisings of women, Black and Brown people, and workers. So I feel that I cannot teach revolt how to stay alive, how to carry itself forward. The only reassurance is that revolt will not ever end until the conditions of this society that give it cause are finally abolished.

Regarding the most recent uprisings, I lament the fact that the virus coincides with the current wave of revolt in the US. We can only wonder how many more people would have joined the uprisings—especially people with underlying health conditions and risks, or those with young children and others to care for at home—all those whose hearts were with the insurrection while the rest of their bodies were quarantined. Well, we can imagine many things and we must. But a theorist must also go to the real, to the concrete, to the actually happening. That is the only way to consider the difference and the distance between what is and what ought to be, and we have no choice but to think from there. It is either that, or theory becomes nothing but pataphysics. There is perhaps always a pataphysical dimension to radical thinking, but at the same time, the existing reality must end.

Notes

1. Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).
2. Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
3. Ibid, 30-32.
4. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).
5. Guy Debord, "The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy" in *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 197-198.
6. Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (New York: Zed Books, 2012).
7. Richard Gilman-Opalsky and Stevphen Shukaitis, *Riotous Epistemology: Imaginary Power, Art, and Insurrection* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2019).
8. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions" in *Socialism or Barbarism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010). The citations that follow are from p. 112 and 122 of this edition.



Ill Will sits down with Richard Gilman-Opalsky, author of *Specters of Revolt*, to talk about a “politics against politics”, the continuity of revolt, and the George Floyd rebellion.

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