

Civilizational Politics and Dissenting Individuals: A Comment on Martin Matušík's *Specters of Liberation*

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ON THE night of May 24th, 1968, I participated in a mass demonstration by some 50,000 Parisian students and workers. At that time France had been paralyzed by a general strike for several weeks, and calls for the resignation of the government, and even for socialist revolution, were heard daily.

After a brief hesitation, the idea of burning down the stock exchange captured the imagination of the crowd, and off we set down darkened streets toward the citadel of capitalism. Surely no one expected capitalism to die in the flames, but it seemed an appropriately symbolic act given our socialist aspirations.

The mood of the march grew increasingly somber. I recall young men breaking into construction sites along the way and equipping themselves with workers' helmets and wooden sticks. Halfway to our goal the march divided into two separate columns, the better to evade police barriers that might be placed in our way. Soon afterwards, my column found itself walking toward a T intersection. The end of our street was blocked by a large public building and we seemed to be turning to the left under its facade to go around it.

Suddenly we heard the people in front of us hissing "shhh, shhh" and, wondering why, we fell absolutely silent and walked on tip toes. Imagine, a column of 25,000 marching on tip toes! Did we think we could hide? As we approached the building at the end of the street, we saw the reason. A large sign read: "Quiet. Hospital Zone."

I felt an enormous joy on reading that sign. We had accomplished a minor

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miracle: we were the sort of violent crowd liberal ideology always warns against, but we were a rational, even a gentle crowd; we had mercifully allowed the sick to sleep.

What was the significance of our act? I was at a conference on the May Events of 1968 last month and one of the speakers suggested that the failure of this demonstration to seize a state building—an objective well within reach—showed the students' lack of commitment and the fictive character of their revolution. Perhaps we did not even take ourselves seriously enough to wake the sick? Are *real* revolutionaries courteous?

This discussion brought back another memory. As the May Events were getting started on the campuses, but before the general strike began, UNESCO held a conference on Marx. Herbert Marcuse was invited. He suddenly found himself in the middle of a typical journalistic feeding frenzy. He who had never thought of himself as a public figure had his photo on the cover of that week's *Nouvel Observateur*, and articles about his ideas appeared in *Le Monde*. Marcuse was said to be the "maître à penser," the guru, of the students in revolt.

In the afternoon, walking to his hotel, he was recognized by the students guarding the occupied Art School, and invited to address the General Assembly of the strikers. In his heavily accented but resonant French, he greeted the students in the name of the American student movement and "all those struggling against the affluent societies of repression and domination."

Marcuse's greeting echoed our sentiments. We were in revolt for justice, equality, a richer, more fulfilling life than that offered by consumer society. But we didn't want Soviet style communism, the reign of the logic of history, or rather of political tyranny disguised as historical necessity. One leaflet announced: "Progress will be what we want it to be." We stood against the blind course of economic and technological development, East and West.

A few days later, in the courtyard of the Sorbonne, I met another participant in the UNESCO conference, a famous Italian Marxist. He shrugged his shoulders, smiled and said, "This is not a revolution, it's a carnival." I was furious. Strengthened by Marcuse's endorsement of our movement, I told him he was a blood-thirsty fool if he thought a revolution proved itself by dealing in death.

Walter Benjamin describes revolutions as chips of "messianic time," a time of radical rupture in which everything is suddenly possible. This time is not continuous with a bad present but harks back to earlier revolutions and forward to uncharted Utopian realms. We were living this kind of time in 1968.

May 24th was an especially significant messianic moment. We were silent because we recognized instinctively that the principles in the name of which we revolted excluded needless indifference to the suffering of others. Our revolt was conscious of its contingency, its necessary coexistence with other values. It was violent and determined but not tyrannical.

Later I was to discover the implicit logic of our action in Camus, a nearly

forgotten spokesman for existential revolt. Camus wrote: "To be, man must revolt, but his revolt must respect the limit it discovers in itself—a limit at which men encounter each other and begin to be." Existentialism was thus still very much on the agenda in 1968. In fact it was Sartre who had the deepest insight into the May Events when he described them as "enlarging the field of the possible." The Events lifted the barriers to imaginatively approaching advanced societies and the many technical and administrative obstacles to democratic participation they set up.

These reflections take me by a path I know is all too roundabout to a consideration of Martin Matušík's important new book *Specters of Liberation*. I have permitted myself this trek down memory lane because it situates me generationally with respect to Matušík's very generationally self-conscious work. I am of '68; he is of '89. I am concerned with movements against technocracy and for the democratization of technology; he is concerned with multiculturalism, gender, and the dissenting individual. Of course our differences are not so much a question of age as of our different messianic moments, his 21 years after mine and so close to the present that we can still see the glow of it in his writing and perhaps, if we look close, on his face too.

There is another reason to emphasize the generational aspect of our encounter here today. Matušík intends a recovery of Marcuse for an emancipatory theoretical and practical project. The work of recovery, which also includes Sartre and Fanon, must fight an uphill battle against 25 years of increasingly abstract social theory which has so effectively evacuated the existential dimension of politics that these great thinkers of the 1960s are practically forgotten today. Matušík's ambition, and it is quite an ambition, is to show us how to read them once again in our contemporary situation.

Now, I was a student of Marcuse. I have tried over the last 30 years to build on his work, although in tension with his more pessimistic conclusions. I have attempted to develop a concept of resistance against the one-dimensional technological order he described. So, I believe I have a stake in Matušík's rescue operation, as it directly affects my own project. Am I too "recovered" from the obscurity of a preoccupation with the currently unfashionable theme of technology as ideology that was central to Marcuse's writings from 1964 to 1969? That is what we will see.

Matušík's subtitle is "Great Refusals in the New World Order." Here we have the basic polarities of his theory: great refusals are those "existentially material" sites of resistance that emerge from so many dispersed sites in the New World Order created by international capital. These seem to me to be the right themes on which to focus critical social theory.

Specters of Liberation offers a powerful critique of attempts to theorize resistance that do not start out from its reality in the world today. Formalistic proceduralism, textual reductionism are both impoverished humanly by comparison

with actual social movements. For once practice is richer than theory and can inform theory with new approaches.

So far so good. But what of the other side of the coin, the New World Order against which these sites of resistance are ordered? What has Matušík to say about it? Here I find his book's essential weakness. Unlike Marcuse, Matušík does not add to our knowledge of the system. I think this is due to the framework of the debate within which he is seeking to develop his own position. This leads to certain limitations in his concept of resistance I will want to discuss further. But let me return to the first point, his positive contribution to understanding that concept.

The first thing that struck me about the book is the incongruence of an existential investigation into dissent, based on actual experience, and the theoretical debates over modernity and postmodernity that provide a constant reference and background. To articulate his position, Matušík must wade through a sea of elaborate theory justifying trivial, purely verbal transgressions, appeals to empty formal universals, and dreams of integral identity and community. This intellectual climate is clouded with false dichotomies. Its affirmations and negations are so abstract as to bear no relation to the political life of dissenting men and women in the New World Order of today. Yet here and there Matušík finds interesting ideas that he struggles to string together in new arrangements. His challenge to the dominant theoretical alternatives turns out to bear a close resemblance to the ideas of Marcuse, Sartre, and Fanon, existential theorists of revolt from an earlier time.

What is the problem of the dissenting individual? In common sense terms, it is the apparent paradox of belonging to a community while resisting its dominant values. It appears that the dissenter breaks loose from the community and its traditions and sets him/herself up as a willful, atomistic individual. Yet Socrates, the very archetype of dissent, explains that he has not turned away but dedicates himself in dissent to the welfare of the community. How can this be?

This question leads to another more fundamental one. What is it to be an individual? Individuation requires socialization, belonging to a culture, possessing an identity. Yet identity does not normally obliterate the independence of the individual but on the contrary is the condition for it. Identity and difference, community and individuality are not opposites but dialectically correlated. This does not preclude the emergence of explosive tensions between them. Possessive individualism declares its independence of community and strives to escape all traditional forms and values in pursuit of profit. Tyrannical and nationalist communities oppress the individual and attempt to restrict personal freedom and self-affirmation. Clearly, a balance is necessary.

Democracy is supposed to supply that balance. It offers a way for independent individuals to work together in a community without sacrificing their independence. The democratic answer must be correct, but it is also insufficient.

Democracy coexists with a globally organized system of market capitalism that creates obstacles to freedom. That New World Order presupposes a type of individualism incompatible with community; and it establishes a class system which imposes such harsh conditions on millions of people in the neocolonies that they cannot be reconciled in community with their oppressors.

As if this were not enough, really existing democracy is haunted by race and gender bias. This corrupts democratic debate. Every debate, no matter how free, presupposes a framework of assumptions and dispositions. To the extent that that framework embodies these biases, the democracy it supports will be particular and biased as well. Strict conformity to official democratic procedures may very well reproduce those biases.

Thus democracy by itself can't solve the problem despite the fact that it is an ideal and a goal everywhere it does not exist. Protest and dissent are still legitimate and necessary even at the liberal/neo-liberal "end of history." The dissenting individual remains a fundamental moral and political fact that cannot be absorbed into democratic theory.

Matušík argues for this conclusion by triangulating between Habermasian universalism, anglo-American communitarianism, and French postmodernism, grounding out the static of debate in existential reality checks. The argument has the following structure:

1. Habermas's discourse theory offers a persuasive ground for democracy in the nature of communicating subjects, but his position can be criticized for a twofold formalism: it abstracts from the concrete material conditions of labor by consigning the economy to a supposedly rational "system" which is treated as a necessary dimension of modern social life; and it abstracts from subjects' race, gender, and national identity by assigning these dimensions of the person to a subordinate realm of the "good" that is isolated from the realm of the "right" in which democracy is grounded. These two abstractions are the source of an existential deficit that haunts the theory. Marcuse is there to remind us of this deficit, of the importance of going beyond the discourse of rights to a concrete critique of the organization of modern social life. He calls our attention to the existential needs denied in the system Habermas treats as a neutral necessity.

2. Communitarianism attempts to overcome the deficit by valorizing authentic belonging, but to what and why? Traditions gather but they also exclude. Remember Dixie. We must not inhabit a common culture without retaining a critical distance. In this domain, so fraught with the memory of evil nationalisms and ethnic cleansings, there can be no excuses. It will not do to claim the a priori innocence of the identity politics of the oppressed. Fanon is there with his prescient warning about the degeneration of the nationalism of the oppressed into tyranny and neo-colonialism. Yet as Fanon also argued, critical social theory must come to terms with concrete gender and race identity. It cannot rest content with theorizing an abstract bearer of rights.

3. Postmodernists, for example Foucault and Derrida, explode the framework of the universalism/communitarianism debate. The problem of identity and difference concerns the very nature of the subject presupposed by that framework. In raising this question, postmodernism borders on the concerns of a theory of dissenting individuality. But postmodern genealogies, in their attempt to avoid substantializing the subject, tend to reduce it to the conditions of its social production. A subject which is merely a reflex of subordination in a disciplinary society cannot rise to the level of political agency. At best it may transgress the conditions that create and bind it in individualistic gestures without clear normative, much less revolutionary, significance. But Sartre is there to remind us that however particularized and fragmented the subject may appear, it is a singular universal. Its acts manifest a quality it shares with others in revolt. Together they may form coalitions and solidarities. Through existential bonding transgressions they may pass over into agency.

Given this triangular background, what can we say about the nature and the ground of dissenting individuality? It cannot be grounded in abstract right because right is realized in the very democratic institutions against which the dissenting individual rises. Can it then be justified by particular claims, for example, to racial identity? But that way lies the slippery slope leading to nationalism and a regression behind the level of freedom achieved by democratic institutions, however imperfect.

The problem is in the way the question is posed. If we ask what justifies dissent, we imply that it is an opinion that ought to be brought before the bar of reason for judgement. Of course the opinions put forward in particular acts of dissent are subject to rational discussion, but dissent as an existential possibility of democratic subjects is not debatable. The Kierkegaardian moment of self-choice as a dissenter is lost in the argumentative reconstruction of the dissenting act.

What kind of an act is dissent? Communities demand loyalty whatever their flaws, and rightful procedures demand compliance whatever contextual considerations might tell against their application. Dissent attends to the flaws and contexts and refuses loyalty and compliance, thereby establishing the dissenter as a third term, a morally qualified and independent subject more fundamental than either community goods or procedural rights. Dissent is thus a performatively established reality, i.e. a reality that comes to be in being "named." Insofar as I dissent—that is, insofar as I "name" myself as a dissenter—I enter the realm of ethical obligation while also establishing myself as incommensurable with any particular community values or universal rights.

This theory of dissent reminds me of the spirit of the May Events. Like the Events, it attempts to establish the possibility of a new kind of politics. We are familiar today with two main kinds of politics, an instrumental politics which aims at power, laws, and institutions; and the identity politics through which

individuals attempt to redefine their social roles and their place in society. I would argue that the May Events represents a third kind of politics which I'll call a civilizational politics, a politics of civilizational self-definition. The question of this politics is, What kind of people are we, what can we expect as a basic minimum level of justice and equality in our affairs?

Like other new left movements, the May Events replied that we cannot go on as before. In choosing ourselves as political agents—for many of us it was the very first time—we chose a different world in which workers are not enslaved to machines, knowledge and creativity chained to markets, and politics run by bosses whose shining image is projected by tame mass media.

This protest avoided the moral ghetto of philanthropic activism that threatens Matušík's project now that he is no longer on the front lines in Czechoslovakia. One famous piece of graffiti on the walls of Paris read: "Do not serve the people, they will serve themselves." Not out of personal self-sacrifice, but out of a larger sense of who and what we were, we demanded a different society from which the most oppressed among us would have benefitted too. No identitarian qualifications or moral credentials beyond a free spirit are required to resist the domination of a technocratic order. Ideologies that stood in the way, even if they be identified with "rationality" itself, had to be overthrown. Remember the paradoxical claim that "Progress will be what we want it to be." This is a claim which I think Matušík should endorse.

He does take it up briefly in relation to Habermas's distinction between system and lifeworld. The distinction is familiar. The complexity of a modern society depends on the growth of system rationality, i.e. markets and administration, but where system overreaches its legitimate boundaries and colonizes lifeworld, social pathologies result.

What is wrong with this distinction? Simply that it immunizes the system against democratic critique! From Habermas's point of view, any attempt to democratize the system is Utopian, even dangerous. But Matušík quite reasonably asks why democracy must stop at the factory gate. Should workers be asked to submit to their condition in the name of reason? And how does sober resignation in the face of the rational conditions of modernity square with the appalling consequences of the return to capitalism in the ex-communist world, hardly a model of rationality?

These are the right questions, but despite my agreement, I am not satisfied with the way the issues are handled in the book. The problem is simple: how can one write so self-confidently about the democratic potentials of dissent without addressing explicitly, at some length, and in depth, the basic issue Habermas raises? Habermas's system concept merely articulates the common sense of the conformist mainstream of the social sciences and business. Thus in quickly dismissing the issue, Matušík, and most of the other participants in current debates around critical theory and postmodernity, simply fail to address the principle objections to all their theorizing about liberation.

The technocracy against which we struggled in 1968 has not been overthrown in the interim. It is alive and well and still shapes all the practically significant intellectual agendas in our society. Corporate managers, economists, development specialists, bankers, engineers, work system designers, urban policy specialists all live in an intellectual environment dominated by the certainty that progress will *not* be what *we* want it to be but what it *must* be in the pursuit of efficiency.

I would not want to claim that every work of critical social theory must address this problem, but so few of them actually do that it is reasonable to reproach the rest of them for the oversight. While most critical theorists ignore these issues, the discussion of technology among the culturati is given over to mystified exaggerations of the one-dimensionality thesis *à la* Virillio and the gee whiz enthusiasm of *Wired* magazine.

What would Marcuse say? I would like to employ him as our existential reality check. He often served this purpose for us in the 1960s and '70s, speaking as he did out of the depths of a long historical experience. In his work the realm of materiality includes technology, is essentially technological. We are all involved in technology in every aspect of our daily lives, work and leisure, transportation and communication, even sex, health, art. The structure of the technological system biases our social life and imposes a false order that maintains competition and scarcity in the midst of abundance. Gender and race issues are part of a larger movement embracing everyone in the demand for a pacified society. Nothing has changed in this regard since 1964. The theory of one-dimensionality still challenges us today as it did the generation of students to which I belonged. Technology is still ideology.

The new left and the May Events responded to this insight and launched a whole new approach to the politics of technology. That approach lives to this day and has born fruit in the many social movements around technical issues in such different domains as medicine, the environment, and computerization. Even the guerilla movement in El Salvador confronted the question of technology with original collective solutions in the territories it controlled. As MacDonald's spreads its tentacles across the countryside there, we are brought face to face with the meaning of defeat.

Unprecedented struggles and innovations in the technical sphere testify to a growing will on the part of the citizens of modern societies to control their own technical destiny. There are gaps in the one-dimensional closure of the system. Probing them is an essential dimension of a radical democratic movement, and of critical theory as well.

These reflections on technology are entirely relevant to Matušík's argument. Here too emerge dissenting individuals. What is the nature of their dissent, which directly faces the claims of the technocracy to an exclusive monopoly on rationality? Can they succeed in democratizing a technological society, and if so on what terms? How is human dignity and freedom at stake in their struggles?

Until we can answer these questions, we have not joined social mind to body, however rich our references to a body politics of gender and race. Our particularity and contingency lies not only in these qualifications, but also in the subordinate role we play in the multiple technical systems of our society. Deny that, ignore that, and you might as well concede the Habermasian distinction of system and lifeworld. But working out a radical social critique of technology is no easy task. It is a challenge that may require the combined efforts of the generations of 1968 and 1989!