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IN DROW A WORD IN COMMON

“There has been a constant search for a term to describe a human being in the widest sense.”

–G.L Brook, *Words in Everyday Life* [1]

It is time we consider words as territories of potential that might enable us to radically rethink our present, or as fields of radical negotiation. Since the Arab uprisings of late 2010 and 2011, and the movements that erupted in the world thereafter—from the Indignant movements to Occupy—we are in a moment in which the definitions of collective action, and indeed, organization, have become open to redefinition. There has been much discussion around notions of direct democracy, people power, and freedom for all. But what does it mean to be free today? And what does it mean to be collective? Or more generally: What is to be done when words lose their meaning, or are no longer capable of defining the present? Take the word ‘freedom’—does it even exist?

This is where the commons comes in. But what is the ‘the commons’? In the traditional sense, the commons is a shared and managed territory—often natural resources—or public utilities—managed and distributed in common. The pervading idea around such commons is that an external Leviathan— a social

contract—is necessary to avoid what Garrett Hardin identified in his 1968 essay on the subject as “the tragedy of the commons,” the idea that communities are incapable of sharing resources fairly because man will always favour self-interest over the needs of the collective, which is why central governments are entrusted with managing natural resource systems.[2]

In response to this idea, Elinor Ostrom’s 1990 Nobel Prize winning publication, *On Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*—investigates sustainable practices in the governance of common pool resources (fisheries, water basins, irrigation systems). Ostrom looked to the inshore fishery at Alanya, Turkey, as an example of a common pool resource organised as a managed territory: fishing sites allotted to local fishermen using guidelines based on the fair and equal distribution of fishing grounds designed by the fishermen themselves. It is a map of sorts that defines the fishing grounds of Alanya as a site managed according to the needs of the stakeholders existing within it. This is an idea of the commons that counters Hardin’s idea that a social contract upheld by a central government is the best way to save mankind from itself. Yet, Ostrom does not discount the sovereignty of government, either, in this horizontal reading

of common management; what occurs in Alanya occurs within the bounds of a sovereign state, which brings us to Lewis Hyde’s view of the commons as a stinted thing.

Indeed, for Hyde, one of the greatest misconceptions surrounding the notion of the commons: that it is a free-for-all. For Hyde, Hardin the tragedy of the commons is not about the commons at all, but about “an unmanaged common pool resource.”[4] Reading the evolution of the commons through land distribution in the Middle Ages – when villagers held collective rights to common lands – Hyde explains how historically, the commons and markets were managed to suit social and moral ends, where “no one was left to follow his or her own ends without regard for the group.” Hyde recounts historian E.P Thompson’s citing of a 1768 pamphlet emphatically protesting against the supposed liberty of every farmer to do what he likes, stating that this would be a “natural” rather than “civil” liberty.[5] As Hyde wrote: “To these eighteenth century eyes, a stinted market, one constrained by moral concerns, is a social market, while a wholly free market oper-

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ating without limits is savage.”[6]

The difference between “civil” and “savage” freedom is something to think about when thinking about the management of the cultural or information commons today. As Michael Hardt points out, there is a tendency to take information, cultural products and codes as quasi-natural or at least given, like natural resources. Thus, the same issues of control seep into the processes of management. In these cases, notes Hardt, the commons function as “a critique of how assigning property rights to immaterial goods prevent them from being shared.”[7] This view feeds into the debates on the Creative Commons and online file sharing, now under threat by increasing Internet legislation.

And yet, as Brad Lichtenstein notes, the cultural commons are first and foremost something that is created together, and secondly a space that creatively “embraces values like sharing, community and stewardship as opposed to privatization, enclosure and exploitation.”[8] This is the double-edged sword of the creative commons: Instagrams as much as Richard Prince can get away with claiming someone else’s photo as his own. In reality, the cultural commons cannot exist as a free-for-all, either; take Paul Cantor’s recent insistence on paying for his music and his mov-

ies. Why? Because “You can’t just take take take. You have to give back. Because these systems are vital to the creation, transmission, consumption and exchange of ideas.” There are people whose livelihoods depend on the very industries we take for free, after all. As Cantor notes, “The people who produce these products deserve to be paid.” You might call it a basic right—that people are compensated for their labour. This is the creative commons not as a free-for-all, but an egalitarian place of exchange. Freedom, in this sense, is a sum of negotiations.

In this sense, we might think of the commons, from the water we drink to the data we transmit via the Internet, as a materially or immaterially defined territory upon which terms of common agreement must be negotiated, established, and upheld. This is what you might call the basic foundation of any true democracy—a political form that is still in the process of being defined, articulated, or even understood in more complex terms. You see, the very term, “democracy” which in turn relates to a certain notion of freedom, is bound up with the contradictions of meaning—the problem that words manifest realities.

Consider Kareem Rizk’s 2010 work, *YOU ARE FREE NO. 5*. The statement comes with a disclaimer,

er, *terms and conditions apply. This could suggest two things: a civil contract – a stinted freedom managed in common. Or an aggressive marketing technique designed to blindside consumers, which points to a more insidious, savage freedom: The kind Hobbes’ *Leviathan* was formulated to constrain. This is the catch-22 of capitalism: a neoliberal system that at once promises our freedoms while determining the limits of them, too.

Now take Rizk’s poster as a commons of sorts: a territory of contention and contradiction that questions our concept of freedom in a way that echoes Hardt’s interpretation of Jacques Rancière’s definition of the common (*le commun*):

The common, of course, is not the realm of sameness or indifference. It is the scene of encounter of social and political differences, at times characterized by agreement and at others antagonism, at times composing political bodies and at others decomposing them.[9]

When it comes to Rizk’s statement, the question is this: under whose terms and conditions are we free? Under what parameters is freedom defined? What does it mean to be free and who could

describe the true meaning of freedom? The very attempt at defining freedom begs the question: to whom does our freedom belong? For Sartre, one aspect of freedom is that it is a metaphysical absolute – something that is inherent in all of us. His description of intentional action illustrates the act of being free as a moment of toil: “to act is to modify the shape of the world,” he wrote. “...it is to arrange means in view of an end; it is to produce an organized instrumental complex such that by a series of concatenations and connections, the modifications throughout the whole series finally produces an anticipated result. But this is not what is important for us here. We should observe that an action on principle is intentional.”[10]

This description shows action to be a moment of organization: a moment in which one enters the role of craftsman in the arrangement, even modification of the world’s shape. At the heart of this act is the intention. Take 20th Century American poet and social activist Langston Hughes’ poem, *Freedom’s Plow*. Here, “America” is identified as a land

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So what is to be done? Perhaps it begins with perception. In the end, the only way we might conceive of something beyond the current manifestations of “freedom” is if we are willing to accept what words have become, and how their meanings have manifested in our realities



created in common, driven by a dream nourished in common. Hughes writes that from free hands, slave hands, adventurous hands to indentured hands: “All these hands made America.” He tells his readers to be patient for the day that everyone in America is free. America is the representation of an immaterial commons – the very idea of freedom itself.

Freedom’s Plow recalls the open-

ing work in Glenn Ligon’s solo show, America, at the Whitney Museum in 2011: Hands, 1996, a screen-print of a photograph taken from the 1995 Million Man March against wage and employment disparities between black and white Americans, as well as the lack of black representation in the US government’s political agenda. Ligon’s hands, like Hughes’s, invoke the very hands that built America – hands that

carry a history wrought with tension between master and slave. This linked to another work included in Ligon’s show: I AM A MAN, 1988, which references a protest sign used in a 1968 strike by African American sanitation workers in Memphis. These two works by Ligon suggest an imbalance – an inequality that recalls, as Sartre would describe it, an instance in a society when one class deprives members of another class their freedom in order to simulate their own.[11] This is the land of the free representing a mismanaged commons – one that does not operate with moral or social interests. Freedom takes on another meaning altogether: in reality the opposite of its definition. We have lost control of its meaning.

As G.L Brook notes: “Words are conventional symbols [that] bear [...] the meaning which the speakers of a language have at any given time tacitly agreed to assign to it.”[12] Thus, to form notions, build meanings, and construct realities based on ideas, a general consensus is required that would enable the establishment of such notions in practice; a common agreement of what specific words mean on a collective level. But this returns us to Rizk’s piece: You Are Free. The duality of the statement brings to mind the final line in an opera staged by The Civilians based on the Los Angeles porn industry, in which a young cam girl sings: “I’m Free!”— this relates to the fact that she chats

online to people for free to a certain point, after which payments must be made. Yet, she is certain of her own freedom, too. This is when the play breaks its fourth wall: the audience become implicated in this contradictory reality. In capitalism, we are all bound to a system on which our lives—or way of life—depend. But this system has produced a concept of freedom that manifests as the concept’s opposite: consider here the Mediterranean refugee crisis—an issue to which we are all historically linked.

This leads us back to the question at hand. What are we to do if the words that define us have lost their meaning? Here, Steve Colbert’s definition of “wikiality” proves useful. Defined as a reality that becomes truth if enough people agree with a notion and define it, usually via a Wikipedia-like system, “wikiality” is a 21st Century “reality as determined by general [online] consensus.”[13] This is the construction of meaning through consensus; a building of a definition in real-time—a word constructed through a common space. Compare this to the way Iceland re-wrote its constitution in 2011 after the 2008 financial meltdown by engaging the electorate in the process of producing a bill that was put to public referendum in October 2012, in which two-thirds of voters voted to use the crowdsourced constitution as the basis for the country’s new one.[15] Though the draft constitution was, as Open

Democracy reported, ‘put on ice’ when it was put forward to the Icelandic parliament in 2013, this was an example of an attempt at negotiating a constitution on common ground.

That the Icelandic crowdsourced constitution somehow failed, it still offers a valuable demonstration of how the commons works in practice; one that might be considered alongside the various movements that erupted out of the 2011 Arab uprisings. It also acts as proof that somehow, Hardin’s Tragedy of the Commons may well be true to an extent, though the idea of humans acting in self-interest merely reflects the way capitalism has colonised every aspect of our lives, down to the very words we use to define our greatest aspirations.

So what is to be done? Perhaps it begins with perception. In the end, the only way we might conceive of something beyond the current manifestations of “freedom” is if we are willing to accept what words have become, and how their meanings have manifested in our realities. What we must also remember is that words are a commons because they define who we are and how we live. Thus, their meanings require the same management, care, and protection as a natural commons; we need to nurture, protect, and actively work at the maintenance of their meanings in the real world. Indeed, turning to Rizk’s question once more, perhaps its

time we consider the question honestly: are we really free? The answer lies in how we (collectively) define, distribute and manage the concept in common.

[9] Hardt, M. On Production and Distribution of the Common. A Few Questions of the Artist. Courtesy of Foundation Art and Public Space: <http://classic.skor.nl/article-4111-en.html>

[10] Sartre, J-P. (tr.) Barnes, H.T. Being and Nothingness (1984). New York: Washington Square Press, 589

[11] “...exploitation of man by man . . . characterized by the fact that one class deprives the members of another class of their freedom” (Notebooks, 562, courtesy of Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sartre-p/>)

[12] Brook, G.L. Words in Everyday Life (1981). London: Macmillan, 3

[13] Urban Dictionary: Wikiality: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=wikiality>

[14] An Architektur, On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides (July, 2010). E-flux Journal #17. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/>

[15] Kerr, D. ‘Icelanders Like Their Crowdsourced Constitution,’ Cnet.com, October 22, 2012: <http://www.cnet.com/news/icelanders-like-their-crowdsourced-constitution/>

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Noor Miyan

Be it Victoria brand eye-liner
Or the kohl of the heroine Writambhara
The purest of these were only made by Noor Miyan
Or so my grandmother believed!

She'd always buy some from him.
One thin line of darkness she'd draw
And her eyes would threaten like rain clouds
Rivers would merge in them
Those eyes would flow into oceans
Wherein we children would gaze
And see it all!

My grandmother blessed him and his kohl
It gifted her with youth in old age
And light to pierce needles with thread.
I often wanted to tell her she was Sukanya
And Noor Miyan her Chyawan Rishi
His kohl the elixir of her eyes.
Her eyes were not eyes, but irises.
His kohl, the gift of nourishment.

And Noor Miyan went away to Pakistan!
Why? They say he had no one here.
Who were we? Why did he leave?
Without telling us,
Without letting grandmother know?
Why did he go away to Pakistan?

Now there's no dark kohl, nor lit eyes.
My grandmother has left for the banks
From where she had arrived.
She'd married and travelled across the river
She's burnt and has travelled across it again.
And as I scatter her ashes on this river
It flows into her eyes, to meet the ashes
That darken into Noor Miyan's kohl.

And that's the last time
I gifted my grandmother's eyes
With Noor Miyan's kohl.

ON WHETHER FOUCAULT IS A NEOLIBERAL PHILOSOPHER – AND WHAT IT MEANS TO ASK?

The germ of the central question I will attend to in this essay is owed to an interview published in Jacobin magazine under the title 'Can We Criticize Foucault'. The interviewee was a French sociologist who has published an edited volume titled Foucault and Neoliberalism in which the contradictory political affiliations of the French philosopher are questioned from different angles. In the age of the dead author, I will not be directly engaging with either the interview or the edited volume per se – I will not even attempt to answer the question of whether or not Foucault can be criticized. In lieu of this, I will concern myself with how to think about whether Foucault was neoliberal, and what it means to ask this question.

Let us briefly interrogate the question posed in the title of the Jacobin interview 'Can We Criticize Foucault?' What does this question imply? One can begin by asking, who is the "We" that is posing this question as a hypothetical collective subject? Who does the "We" include, and more importantly, what does it exclude when this question is posed from the point of view of a collective pronoun? The other thing to note in this formulation is the fact that it is posed in a way as if to ask for permission. From whom is this collective subject asking permission? And, what is it asking permission to do? It is asking permission to "criticize" an author without mentioning the crime they might have committed.

I would like to point out a key dis-

inction here between the terms 'to critique' and 'to criticize'. While critique can carry the same sense, it also has a more technical sense in the way it was used by Kant in the titles of the tomes of the three Critiques. In this sense, a critique is a laying out of a concept by way of an exposition in order to understand the conceptual limits and means of validity. As opposed to this, criticize, means to actively rebuke someone – not even in the sense of art or literary criticism, but more in the sense of censure. Finally, we must turn to the specter who is at the center of this phenomenon of a collective subject asking permission of a hypothetical other to commit the act of criticism, i.e. Michel Foucault.

Foucault is not an uncomplicated

or unprovocative philosopher, and for good reason. From his being on-the-fence about structuralism as opposed to poststructuralism (Order of Things), or whether it has to do with the impossibility of being a Nietzschean and a Kantian both at once (Habermas), or whether it is to do with constantly skirting back-and-forth between philosophy and history (Power/Knowledge), the philosopher has been at the center of controversy between many realms. In the current context we find Foucault again placed at the center of two supposedly incongruent forms: i.e. Neoliberalism and the Left. The question at hand proposes a counterintuitive hypothesis in the manner of Foucault himself (for instance, when he claims that the prison was planned as a humanitarian project, or that Victorian sexuality was first taken up by the bourgeoisie themselves). In saying that the philosopher who is most associated with developing the lines of critique of neoliberalism is somehow himself a neoliberal is a claim that has certain shock value. No doubt, it is a claim that is seductive, and grabs readers – but it might work to ostracize a theoretical construct without working through its premises.

It is a fact of irony that the philosopher who brings attention to this form of power in a prescient manner is in turn accused of himself being implicated in the neoliberal project. Even if Foucault didn't

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coin the term “neoliberalism,” he was certainly among the first to inaugurate the philosophical discussion on a phenomenon that was fast becoming the structuring rubric of contemporary everyday life in late twentieth century France. Foucault brought attention to the very thing that is now called “Neoliberalism” in the mid-1970s in the now famous Birth of Biopolitics lectures (as Foucault himself admits, a more accurate title for these lectures would be a history or genealogy of Neoliberalism, which is what he proceeds to trace in the lectures).

So what does it mean to be a neoliberal, or even a neoliberal philosopher? As others have noted, the term Neo-Liberal was means of self-identification for certain economists writing in the post-WWII era. Between then and now, it has morphed into an often always already critical word. To be sure, Foucault can be found at the center of the term itself morphing

The question of whether Foucault is a neoliberal, or not can hence be considered as a non-question in this context: paradoxically, he is, he isn't and he both is and isn't neoliberal all at the same time – it depends on who is the speaking subject asking the question, and from what vantage point they pose it.

from a positive self-assertion to a form of disavowal. The accusation of terming Foucault a neoliberal—albeit seductive—is thus a retroactive accusation. Once the negative usage of the term is deployed back to “criticize” Foucault, we find that Foucault himself is wholly bound up within the concept as its meanings mutate through various discursive layers of the conceptual history of Neoliberalism.

At this point I would like to differentiate between what it means to be a neoliberal as opposed to what it means to be a philosopher of neoliberalism. The difference, I would contend would be the difference between the economist Gary Becker and Foucault. This is again a complex difference. Interestingly, when Gary Becker was alerted to Foucault's reading of his texts in 2012, he agreed that whatever Foucault says about his claims is in fact correct. However, what Foucault presents is a positive reading, or a critique if you will. This certainly doesn't mean that if you read a text faithfully that you correspond with the same beliefs and opinions. In this regard, we can say for instance that Marx was a philosopher con-

cerned with capitalism, but to say that Marx was himself a capitalist would imply a whole range of assertions that are not directly associated with Marx's system of thought (while, of course, living in the day and age of capitalist social and economic transformations), or with the economic system he was deeply concerned with his whole life. In this regard, Foucault himself has distanced himself from the study of opinions (doxology), while favoring instead, the excavation of systems of knowledge (archeology).

To wager a blame on the philosopher for being what he studies by way of his supposed opinions (i.e. Foucault may have studied neoliberalism, but his opinions suggest he was himself a neoliberal, as the Jacobin piece suggests) seems like a brash commentary, which instead of taking his philosophy on its own terms, uses extraneous information (his meetings with politicians, or the jokes that he may or may not have cracked in private gatherings) to make other claims that one would be hard pressed to locate in his written work or public lectures.

Allow me to pose a counter-question: Supposing Foucault turns out to be a card-carrying neoliberal, so what? It is true neoliberalism has become somewhat of a dirty word in contemporary academic and critical discourse (usually coming from the Left). In a manner of speaking, by our very

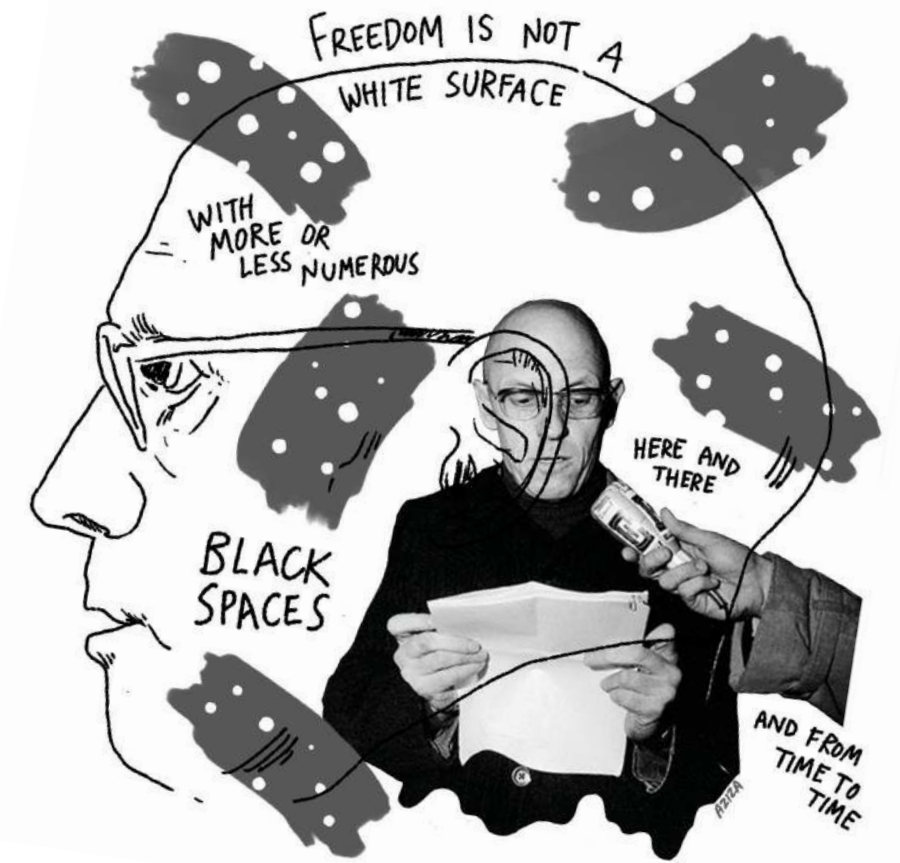
existence in the neoliberal day-and-age (for, we still don't know what neoliberalism exactly!), to some extent we are all neoliberal subjects. However, let's assume that it is possible to be other than neoliberal in an intermeshing globalized economic system, and within this typology of difference we situate Foucault as fundamentally neoliberal. Should his philosophy then be disparaged, or his whole system of thought refuted and found to be corrupt at the core? Should we then burn all the books authored by Michel Foucault - starting with the published lectures as a false flag whose neoliberal siren calls we were once deluded by? Moreover, should we stop reading Foucault if he is neoliberal and has shown his true colors to be such tinted hues of neoliberalism?

Let me attend this question with a comparison with another horrific political category that flourished in the twentieth century only to become even more of a dirty word in contemporary lexicon. This word is Nazism, and we have examples of two self-proclaimed Nazi philosophers or theorists who were implicated at the time with the Third Reich, i.e. Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. We have no doubt about their allegiances to National Socialism at the time, but does that mean we should stop reading them? Their

theories and philosophies stand in their own right. Carl Schmitt for instance provides us one of the most fundamental critiques of liberal politics, while Heidegger's philosophical career gives us a deep insight into his very failure to disavow fascism and the implications it has for his written philosophy. So in short, Foucault should be read despite being a neoliberal, by liberals and by those on the left (especially by those on the Left) to understand what in his philosophy, after all, is symptomatic of what we have now are coming to recognize as neoliberalism.

Now we can turn to the question of whether Foucault's philosophy can be read in a neoliberal manner – or whether it can prove to be useful to actual agents of neoliberalism in this day and age. Of course, there can be many interpretations of philosophical discourse, or otherwise. And, as Foucault has noted, certain types of discursive interventions produce manifold interpretations and generate debates and polemics from multiple angles that can span over centuries.

The fact that there can be mul-



multiple interpretations of a single philosophy can be illustrated through the example of Hegel whose oeuvre generated two opposing bodies of discourse in the form of Right Hegelians and Left Hegelians. Of course, the more interesting expositions out of that lot come from the proponents of Hegel on the Left – like Marx and Feuerbach – while the Hegelian Right has drifted into relative obscurity. Similarly, with the question of people like François Ewald, Foucault's research assistant in the 70s who is also responsible for editing many of the lectures. A prime allegation against Foucault in the aforementioned argument comes by way of Ewald having advised insurance companies and even a bosses union. Even if Ewald is out to put a neoliberal twist on Foucault, does Ewald's interpretation or redeployment of Foucault implicate Foucault's own philosophy? That question can be left open to interpretations – as there may be several! I would simply like to point that Left readings of Hegel are still possible and are still conducted as a manner of thinking through problematics

and ideas.

Balibar has pointed in his reading of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, that it seems like Marx and Foucault each grabbed a part of Hegel's chapter on Abstract Right and effectively tore it in half in their struggle. Thus the part on property and exchange ends up in Marx's hands eventually finding its way into Capital. While the part on “Wrong,” which deals more broadly with the State, ends up with Foucault and eventually manifests in Discipline and Punish. This is not to suggest that Marx and Foucault are perfectly reconcilable via Hegel, or even that attempts should even be made to reconcile their somewhat divergent systems of thought. Rather, it implies that the argument is taken up on different registers, commodity exchange versus exclusions and penalty of the state that protects private property. Hegel's system is a complex philosophical statement and it should be taken on its own terms regardless of how, Marx or Foucault, Right Hegelians

or Left Hegelians, etc. have taken it up in the history that has followed Hegel.

To return to the point of complex discursive events, we must seek to engage Foucault’s interventions through the terms in which he himself developed an understanding of the historical dynamics of debates and disagreements. Particularly, in *The Order of Things*, as well as in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault lays out a detailed introspection of how discursive formations operate, and how the debates that have constituted most concepts that we have come to be familiar with in modernity took place and shaped the societies that were engaging in them.

A prime example of discursive complexities generated by subversive thought can be found in the role Machiavelli plays in Foucault’s 1977 lectures *Security, Territory, Population*. Machiavelli’s Prince is interesting to Foucault, not so much in what it laid out in itself, or what was internal to the text. Rather, it was interesting in the debates it generated between the anti-Maciavellians and the anti-anti-Machiavellians (for Machiavelli himself is a “point of repulsion” at the time). As Foucault argues, a discourse on the Art of Government comes out of Machiavelli’s assault on the Prince. This Art of Government was not present in the Prince or anything else written by Machiavelli for that matter. A positive criterion for governance as care

for a new category of the population came out of the physiocratic arguments which excised the Prince or the sovereign from political discourse while developing a role for “Government” as such. The emergence of the Art of Government discourse is where Foucault locates the practices of “Governmentality” to have been incorporated into the emerging state apparatus – this is incidentally a genealogical precursor to what Foucault later defines as “Neoliberal Governmentality”. Towards the end of his discussion on the discourses that sprouted out of Machiavelli, Foucault adds an insight in terms of contemporary debates:

[Machiavelli] is not at the center of debate insofar as it takes place because of what he said, but insofar as the debate is conducted through him. The debate does not take place because of what he said, and an art of government will not be found through or in him. He did not define an art of government, but an art of government will be looked for in what he said. This phenomenon in which one searches in a discourse for what is taking place, while actually only seeking to force it to say something, is not unique. From this point of view, Marx is our Machiavelli: the discourse does not stem from him, but it is through him that it is conducted.

As a discursive experiment, the

passage quoted above can be reread substituting Foucault for Machiavelli, and Neoliberalism for Art of Government. A corollary could then be added to this, taking into account the contours of the discursive specimen this essay began with. Insofar as Foucault’s own discourses (as someone who understood the subtleties of how history has its way with what mere authors put out into the world) have generated the types of debates they have and insofar as all contemporary debates need to be conducted and articulated through what he said, we might be able to claim that from this point of view that Foucault is our Marx.

Machiavelli is but one example in Western political and philosophical discourse, he would be considered in line with other producers of great debates which Foucault terms “founders of discursivity.” This includes Marx and Freud who “made possible not only a certain number of analogies but also (and equally important) a certain number of differences. They have created a possibility for something other than their discourse, yet something belonging to what they founded.” Thus it is not so much what is stated in the philosophical system per se, rather

the divergences their discourse generates. Balibar has suggested that the discourse generated by Foucault himself can be added to this category. In his discussion of “the point of hearsay” in Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, Balibar points to the appearance of this word in association with a splitting effect, or a kind of feedback loop generated by certain discursive interventions at certain times, by the delicate methodological balancing act between structuralism and poststructuralism that gives his arguments a janus-faced appearance. Balibar connects Foucault’s internally contradictory *modus operandi* via “the point of hearsay” to Pascal’s discussion of hearsay in relation to Christ: “one can speak of Christ’s humanity and one can speak of Christ’s divinity; the only thing you can do about the fact that Christ is both God and man is, paradoxical though it may sound, to hold two contradictory discourses simultaneously.”

The question of whether Foucault is a neoliberal, or not can hence be considered as a non-question in this context: paradoxically, he

is, he isn’t and he both is and isn’t neoliberal all at the same time – it depends on who is the speaking subject asking the question, and from what vantage point they pose it. What does it mean to ask this question? The fact that this debate is even taking place at this point in history speaks directly to something inherent in how Foucault himself understood the history of systems of thought. The point of such debates should not be, in some grand ideological sense, to excise Foucault from the ranks of the “Old Left” or to situate him in some other Left. It should be to take his objections and statements in accordance and to seriously and critically examine them – along with the nature of our contemporary debates in them. Indeed with his

understanding of how discourses work (Foucault warns against polemics, precisely because he knows what discursive effects these forms produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). To be sure, Foucault has made an intervention within Left and critical discourses – this should be taken seriously and built upon to develop new ways of understanding ourselves and the kinds of societies we live in, in order to bring about new kinds of subjects and modes of subjectivation that are possibly different from neoliberalism as such.

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6 See for example, Critchley, Simon. “Being and Time, part 1: Why Heidegger matters” *The Guardian*. 2009. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jun/05/heidegger-philosophy>
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8 Foucault, Michel. *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977--1978*. Vol. 4. Macmillan, 2009. 89-100.
9 *Ibid.*, 243.
10 Foucault, Michel. “What is an Author” in *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology*. Vol. 2. Edited by J. D. Faubion. New York: The New Press; 1998. 217-218.
11 Balibar, Étienne. “Citizen Balibar: An Interview with Étienne Balibar” by Nicolas Duvoux & Pascal Sévérac, In *Books And Ideas*. 26 November 2012 translated by Michael C. Behrent <http://www.booksand-ideas.net/Citizen-Balibar.html>

12 In an interview with Paul Rabinow, on the question of polemics Foucault elaborates: “I like discussions, and when I am asked questions, I try to answer them. It’s true that I don’t like to get involved in polemics. If I open a book and see that the author is accusing an adversary of “infantile leftism” I shut it again right away. That’s not my way of doing things; I don’t belong to the world of people who do things that way. I insist on this difference as something essential: a whole morality is at stake, the one that concerns the search for truth and the relation to the other.” Foucault, Michel “Polemics, politics and problematizations” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. I. Edited by Paul Rabinow.” (1997).

The smell of Coffee

The smell of coffee
two cups lie unwashed
sound of the night bus of london passing
from the window I see the street light
and the stillness of a concretely created environment
And here I am at 5 am
at 37 now
and with the same question that cups of coffee and wine combined
have brought up at 5 am

The question of why I am here
why haven't I expanded into the air

given myself up?
spent myself?

Why am I here?
And at 37 a second question
why am I still here?

At 26 the answers were hard to come by
I would walk with the question across london
on night buses
and into conversations with trees
lamposts
beer bottles
and
stones

but even then I knew the answer had something to do with champagne and Fanon.
Something to do with holding the two together

now I know that I am here because I am sensual.



Because the gaze of a cat can
penetrate to my soul
as much as to my heartbeat
because an earthquake has less of an impact
then the purring of you Gugu Guevara

I know that to move with you Cristina
into music
kisses
spanish
to canter and glisten embraced by your feet
to be held by you
and gently washed by you
to contemplate your skin along with the moon
presents an answer

I know that to stand with comrades
a few or many
to fight a little
but always, consistently, a little at a time

To wait for those behind
that is to wait for oneself
not to rush on ahead
not to be spend
is part of the answer

I haven't given myself up.
I haven't spent myself.

I am here at thirty seven
a little spent and a little preserved
sensual and perplexed,
not rushing on ahead
Learning
Learning to wait for myself



FANON AS EXAMPLE AND FIGURE: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN OSCAR GUARDIOLA-RIVERA AND GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

“Let me say from the outset that it would be a mistake to make Fanon into a clay model for revolution,” says Gayatri Spivak. I’ve asked her about Göran Olson’s 2014 celebrated documentary *Concerning Violence: Nine Scenes from the Anti-Imperialistic Self-Defense*, which she prefaced. Herself the author of an influential body work that includes

A *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* and more recently a translation of Aimé Césaire’s play *A Season in the Congo*, she engaged Olson’s film in signature critical mode. As a counterpoint to the documentary, her preface avoids the often repeated story of Fanon as a champion of counter-violence. “Instead,” she says, “one must understand that in the initial

chapters of *The Wretched of the Earth*, which a lot of people read as an apology of violence, Fanon is actually claiming complicity with what was surrounding him. That is, the violence of colonization.” “I will be as violent as they are, when they hold my life as worth less than theirs,” says Frantz Fanon, the healer. I enquire about her views on Fanon,

in particular, and of decolonization in general. “[Fanon] reflects philosophically on his complicity as ‘a gentleman’ of the French empire,” she replies, before engaging in a concise masterful reading of Fanon’s most controversial work. “The middle chapter has more to do, along the lines of [WEB] Du Bois, whose work I’ve also engaged, with how not to

construct him as just a black man and a problem. By the end of the book, Fanon is reading Hegel. As I said, he was not incapable of understanding philosophy. He’s an intellectual who deliberately reads the *Phenomenology [of Spirit]* as a historical narrative, consciously disobeying Hegel’s simple enough injunction that if you read it that way you would stall the philosophical project of phenomenology. He doesn’t care. This is extremely important, and here I want him to mark an affinity with him. This entire idea, of the sort of ‘intended mistake’ Fanon engages in by literalizing philosophy, has been my formula for the reading of Kant, Hegel and other western philosophers. Fanon decides to read Hegel in just such a way, placing himself in the position of the Hegelian subject. This is not finger-pointing. Rather, he’s doing what I would call ‘affirmative sabotage’. Recognizing that what he is doing is (affirmatively) sabotaging Hegel, by occupying the place of the normative subject, results in a very different Fanon.”

Spivak credits her friend, the novelist Assia Djebar, for much of her renewed perspective on Fanon and decolonization. Assia Djebar is the pen name of Algerian

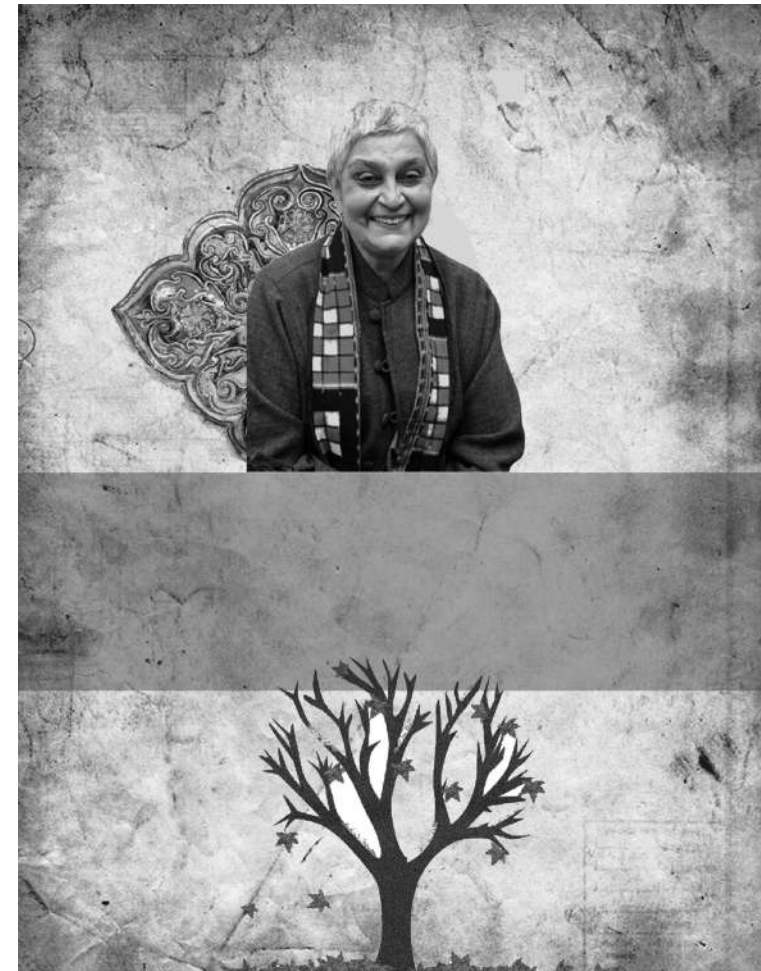


Illustration by Harris Bin Munawar

author, translator and filmmaker Fatima Zohra-Imalayan. From her 1962 *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (*Children of the New World*) through the 1985 *L'Amour, la fantasia* (published in English as *Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade*) to *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* and *Nulle part dans la maison du mon père* (2008) Djebar reflected on her ambivalence about language, writing in French – denied entry into written Arabic in her time and place, as reflected in *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, dedicated to Spivak -- as well as identifying herself as a Western-educated scholar, being at the same time an Algerian and a feminist Muslim intellectual, a spokesperson for North-African women but also for women in general and, finally, for oppressed men and women. Her intellectual and political stance is well known. Fiercely critical of male-

dominated society, and radically anti-colonial. Djebar was elected to the Académie Française in June 2006, the first writer from the Maghreb to become a member of the metropolitan learned society. By then she had won the coveted Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1996, the Yourcenar Prize in 1997, and the 2000 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, and was named frequently as a contender for the Nobel Prize on the strength of her entire body of work before her death in February this year.

“Assia called me her twin sister,” Spivak recalls. “I did not ask for it. It is an honour which I have the responsibility to live up to.” Djebar’s own reading of Fanon may be an instance of what Spivak calls ‘affirmative sabotage’. Throughout her literary and filmic work, she twists and turns Fanon’s central

image of the unveiling of Algeria. In his *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon outlined the resistance by the men and women of the country to a colonial project aimed at defeating the Algerian nation by unveiling its women. The motif proved influential, appearing also in the contribution made by Iranian thinker Ali Shariati, himself a translator of Fanon, to the debates concerning western monoculturalism in the context of the Iranian Revolution. Fanon had depicted Algeria as a veiled woman threatened to be unveiled, a metaphor for rape, as Rita Faulkner has observed. Thus for Fanon the unveiling of Algeria is a sign, a key to unlock the psychological effects violence had on colonized North-Africans. But it is also a sign of hope. The new power that Algerian women found through their participation in the Algerian struggle for liberation, can also be seen as a cypher of a future in which the persistence of women’s equality would herald the historical realization of a modern, socialist, and revolutionary Algeria.

“My dear friend Djebar wrote in Tunis for the *Moujahid*,” says Spivak, “and worked with Fanon. So, she knew him very well.” Djebar, eleven years Fanon’s junior was twenty-three in 1959, when

“Instead,” she says, “one must understand that in the initial chapters of *The Wretched of the Earth*, which a lot of people read as an apology of violence, Fanon is actually claiming complicity with what was surrounding him. That is, the violence of colonization.” “I will be as violent as they are, when they hold my life as worth less than theirs,”

Fanon wrote *A Dying Colonialism*. It is likely she influenced him while working together as writer and editor for the revolutionary newspaper *El-Moudjahid*. No doubt she was as familiar with Fanon’s ideas as with the fact that he was drawing upon a connection between land, the nation, and women’s bodies that can be said to be as old as literature and philosophy themselves. For it can be found in the Christian Book of Genesis as well as in the verse 223 of the Second Sura of the Quran, in traditional Western as well as modern Arabic literature.

In line with that tradition, Algeria was represented as a woman who stubbornly refused the ‘emancipatory seed’ of French Western enlightenment as modernization, who resisted colonialism and globalization, but also as a body to be possessed. So that possessing, conquering, penetrating a North-African woman is in this scheme a step towards conquering North Africa. The same can be said about America, the Amerindian continent thus named by Europeans following the Renaissance Latin tradition before that name was Anglicized and confused solely with its English-speaking part. In the original iconography, cartography and literature of the Americas, from the fifteen century onwards the continent was often represented as an Amazon, a warrior and a she-cannibal, while at the same time an object of sexual desire. That representation is very much at stake in the kind of expressive violence tak-

ing place nowadays in the Mexican-American border, in Central America, and in Colombia, which another friend of Gayatri Spivak, the literary critic Jean Franco, dealt with in her *Cruel Modernity*. Such violence – feminicidio or femicide – focuses specifically, as Fanon put it, on the nameless, faceless women whose bodies become the very site of the various wars affecting the continent (insurgency, counter-insurgency, drugs) and whose existence is reduced to zero.

“It is through Assia Djebar that I get a sense of Fanon as a healer,” says Spivak. “The point that Fanon makes, which nobody bothers to read carefully, is that when you weigh lives so that one Israeli life, for instance, becomes equal to a hundred and fifty Palestinian lives, then violence emerges as the response.”

It isn’t just Africa or the Americas, Israel or Palestine, neither the colonial past nor a remnant

of it in the post-colonial present. What is at stake here, as Spivak explains invoking Fanon and Djebar, is the colonial fantasy. It persists, “whether the imagined contact between races or peoples involves a perilous siege or easy pleasure”, as Woodhull says concurring with Spivak and Djebar’s analysis. And persist it does. Consider 6 October, 2015. During the Conservative Conference in Manchester, the UK Home Secretary, Theresa May, informed her audience that “too much or too fast immigration made a cohesive society impossible,” a statement confirmed on the same day by Prime Minister David Cameron. Next day, during his speech, Cameron condemned racial discrimination in the name of a commendable, British, multicultural society as “the best in the world.” One day, imagined contact between peoples is deemed perilous. Next day, as easy pleasure. The bodies and souls of feminized others, once the site of colonial warfare, have now become the “hearts and minds” to be weighed and won over, conquered, penetrated, in the war against terror, for security and the compromise between classes of the post-colonial Twenty-first century.

Djebar takes stock of this fact in her writings, and of the place occupied by women in our supposedly decolonized societies more than twenty years after her collaboration with Fanon. Spivak invokes her to highlight the limits of women’s place and role today vis-à-vis the (Hegelian) historical, phenomenological and speculative narrative undertaken by Fanon.

“His [Fanon’s] reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* must be understood as an intended mistake, or as I prefer, as affirmative sabotage,” she reiterates during our conversation.

Similarly, Spivak observes, “we must not make Fanon into some clay figure,” or a model for all revolutions past and still to come. Instead, she says, “we must take Fanon forward.” Read him and take him forward into newer conjunctures.

Through Djebar, Spivak takes Fanon forward, affirmatively. If, as Lewis R. Gordon recognizes, “although he acknowledges the psychoanalytical contributions of Anna Freud, [for Fanon] the existential philosophical domains appear squarely in the hands of men,”¹ through Djebar, Gayatri Spivak turns Fanon’s failure to articulate his indebtedness to Beauvoir and other women on its head. For in Djebar’s writing the image of ‘unveiling Algeria’

By the end of the book, Fanon is reading Hegel. As I said, he was not incapable of understanding philosophy. He’s an intellectual who deliberately reads the *Phenomenology [of Spirit]* as a historical narrative, consciously disobeying Hegel’s simple enough injunction that if you read it that way you would stall the philosophical project of phenomenology. He doesn’t care. This is extremely important, and here I want him to mark an affinity with him.

“It is through her [Djebar] that I get a sense of Fanon as a healer,” she repeats. “Again, the point that Fanon makes, which nobody bothers to consider carefully, is that it’s no use accusing anybody of violence when there is this kind of weighing of human life.” “Not even accusing the perpetrator of such violence and weighing?” I ask. “Yes, of course,” says Spivak, “but Fanon is not talking about the colonizer. He is talking about the colonized. He is saying that from the perspective of the one whose life has been so [weighed and] devalued, this is how violence comes.”

Thus understood, there is nothing relativistic in Fanon’s perspectivism. Rather, what follows

description of today’s historicist relativism but also the best prescription for totalitarianism and decisionism.²

“Fanon is saying that the violence which comes in response to the judgment of one [way of] life, that of the colonized, as weighing less than another, the colonizer’s, is not to be judged on the same grounds,” Spivak says. “He does not say one must condone violence. What he is really saying is that one must know there is no absolutist standard unless one has been even to [in trying to] bring about a situation where human lives are equal.”

I put the question to Spivak whether such may be the reason why Fanon is making a comeback. He is being re-read nowadays against a situation totally dominated by an abstract normative injunction on violence that leaves no room for proper ethical distinctions. Or as Hegel and The Cure would put it, a night of the world in which all cats are grey. “Every single violence is supposed to be outlawed, but specifically, revolutionary violence ...” I say, “... in an absolutist way. So, we do not know anymore what is revolutionary violence,” Spivak continues. “To an extent the funniest thing is that the act of revolution is not by necessity a violent act,” she observes. “That is, if one is being close to Marx, and that is where I am, or to Luxembourg who was a fine reader of Marx and did things accordingly, and I am a Rosa Luxembourg-style social

This entire idea, of the sort of ‘intended mistake’ Fanon engages in by literalizing philosophy, has been my formula for the reading of Kant, Hegel and other western philosophers.

democrat, or to Gramsci, and I am also close to Gramsci as a reader of Marx and a practitioner of subalternity. These are my models although it is not up to me to stereotype myself in that way, others will see. In any case, in accordance to these exemplars, and this is also how it seems to me, the idea is not to see revolution as necessarily a site of violence except reactive violence. And how to understand the nucleus of it, that is a much more complicated agenda and I do not think we can apply Fanonian discourse to it,” she explains.

“I have a feeling that if Fanon is going to be useful for us we have to see this, first,” Spivak points out. “Second, we must not make him into some sort of clay figure. After all, this was a young man who died at thirty-six. So, all the time for developing politically still lay ahead of him. One has this unfortunate feeling also with Gramsci. On the other hand, [WEB] Du Bois died at ninety-five. One can see in this contrast that figures who are political evolve in time. This is the sense in which Assia Djebar writes in *Le blanc de l’Algérie*, Algerian White (1996) address-

if one is being close to Marx, and that is where I am, or to Luxembourg who was a fine reader of Marx and did things accordingly, and I am a Rosa Luxembourg-style social democrat, or to Gramsci, and I am also close to Gramsci as a reader of Marx and a practitioner of subalternity. These are my models although it is not up to me to stereotype myself in that way, others will see. In any case, in accordance to these exemplars, and this is also how it seems to me, the idea is not to see revolution as necessarily a site of violence except reactive violence.

gression, from the false concreteness of blackness as skin colour to the abstraction of colonialism. What comes to my mind as part of such an historical-phenomenological narrative is that peculiar sub-section in the chapter On Violence of *The Wretched of the Earth* titled 'Violence at the International Violence', which most readers tend to gloss over. Continuing with your idea of Fanon as affirmative reader of Hegel, one

could say that there is this further movement here from the abstract and yet more encompassing materiality of the colonial world to the even more encompassing and some might say more abstract but also speculative world of finance. A world that must have been much more difficult to contemplate in the nineteen fifties or sixties, but which for us has become quite quotidian and crucial even if we do not understand it, much in the same way medieval Europeans related to religion before the Reformation. Do you think Fanon was considering the process that had begun already in the second half of the twentieth century but would be complete only in our time, that is, the process by means of which the former colonial world would remake itself into a one-world of global finance?" I ask her.

"Yes," Spivak replies. "After all, Fanon lived through a time when the rules of the old colonial world were being re-written. Bretton-Woods had already taken place. Therefore, it is not so much that Fanon is prescient. Rather, he knows it is no longer about the mere reality of experience. This is a man who, after all, was finishing a dissertation on psychiatry. This is not a person committed to some linear, narrative view of subjectivity. Therefore, one has to look at Fanon in this way, as someone trying to understand how these big abstract commitments, colonialism, finance and so on – which are not the same everywhere – affect subjects in

specific and changing ways. This process of subjective change, which was also his, for whatever reason, this coming clear out of sub-Saharan black Africa and into Mediterranean North Africa, is what he looks into and declares in a language, not Arabic, which by the way he did not know so well. So, when he declares he's Algerian he is saying a very different thing [about the psychological consequences and implications of colonialism and its avatars] which we do not know how to hear. Then, what you are talking about is the much more leftist idea of the economic implications of the future of colonialism. You can't have a naïve view of decolonization when at least you can think it. You don't know it [what these implications might be] but you can think it."

Listening to Spivak speak of what we do not know how to hear, I wonder whether this is also a case of what we do not want to hear. There is a connection between the two. And it is important. In Aimé Césaire's play about the tragic assassination of the leader of Congolese independence, *A Season in the Congo*, which Spivak recently translated, Patrice Lumumba, the protagonist, is the one who pursues the question that no one else wants to hear. It's

the same as in the case of Assia Djébar's women, who "are always haunted by desire," as she says. While taking to Spivak, I can't stop thinking about how haunted she is. By friends – some alive, most of them dead. But also, and this amounts to the same thing, by desire. Which, in turn, is the same thing as saying the she is haunted by the question we, no one, wants to hear. While discussing Fanon, she produces out of some testimonial evidence given to her by a ghost-friend, a connection between Frantz Fanon and Patrice Lumumba. When everything seems to be harmonious, in history as in our conversation, under control, the two of them enter the stage in the role of the discomforter (as Lumumba calls himself in Césaire's play). That is, the one who interrupts the straight story. Such is the lesson of tragedy: History does not follow a straight line.

"There is one more thing I'll say here," Spivak observes. "It would be good to look at [the fate of] Pan-Africanism in this context. We hardly talk about these things in the context of Fanon. Yet, both Fanon and Patrice Lumumba attended the 1958-9 All-African

People's Conference in Accra. As I was told by my friend, the Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor who died recently, he was shot at the Westgate shopping mall in Kenya - he's smiling, we're sitting drinking a fruit juice from his trees at the garden - 'well, you know, both the tall one and the short one were at that one'. The tall one is Lumumba, and the short one is of course Fanon. So Fanon had dealings with people like Lumumba. Assia Djébar makes the connection when she writes about the Barbarian who has shown to the Romans that a Berber 'can combine bravery and intelligence with ... a fierce personal reticence'. Later, the female protagonist of the novel sees him, Jugurtha, that's the Berber's name, dying of hunger in a dungeon in Rome. Djébar says of Jugurtha that he is the first Lumumba."

"There are other connections," Spivak insists. There is the one that she postulates between Jugurtha, Lumumba and Fanon,

for instance, with the help of her ghost friends and theatre. There's another, if one brings into the conversation Souleymane Bachir Diagne's introduction to Spivak's version of *A Season*. "Everything is under control and then comes a 'discomforter'," he observes.³ So, here it is, another point of entry into history, through philosophy and theatre, violence and the decolonial: Enter Orestes/Oedipus/Socrates/Diotima/Jugurtha/the Rebel/ Caliban/Cugoano/Christophe/Du Bois/Lumumba/Fanon/Djébar/Césaire/Spivak. Enter the one ("the tall one and the short one") who pursues the question no one wants to hear. Let us call this 'An Adjusted Theatrical Account of World's History and Philosophy', with a nod to Paget Henry.⁴ Djébar writes in the novel cited by Spivak: "I see him [Jugurtha], this time 'on the road to Rome,' handed over in chains. 'Rome, a city for sale!' he used to proclaim. He is conquered and taught a lesson. He is Africa's first Lumumba." (So Vast

the Prison, Assia Djébar, p. 344). "There are two theories of translation", Spivak writes in the translator's foreword to *A Season in the Congo*, "you add yourself to the original, or you efface yourself and let the text shine. I subscribe to the second." (*A Season in the Congo*, vii). Maybe we can extrapolate here. Let us speculate that there are equally two theories and practices of history: in the first one, you add yourself to the tradition, imitating its canonical figures, whom you follow. In the second one, you let the text shine, as it is the product of an exemplary author that serves as a model, not for imitation, not as a clay figure, but for influence in the condition of freedom. I subscribe to the second. This is creative freedom, the kind which benefits the man or woman "who asks for the impossible", as per Bachir Diagne, as Spivak "who declares stubbornly that what everybody (...) is satisfied will not do for him" or her. "Thus Lumumba is convinced that Africa needs his



Illustration by Ayaz Jokhio



intransigence,” and he sets another path in motion, one that in his case would end in death, like Salvador Allende, when they ruin the prevailing consensus around compromise “by proclaiming as the true goal for the people (...) the same concept of freedom but in his own tongue.”⁵

German philosopher Immanuel Kant had a name for this procedure. He called it succession, the subjective rediscovery of the maxims of the categorical imperative. For Kant, here following the poet John Milton, achieving a moment of rational ‘conversion’, ‘rebirth’, or ‘revolution’, is demonstrably earned “by a formalism of the mind that the formalism of poetry discloses,” as Sanford Budick puts it.⁶

Perhaps Spivak’s seemingly innocuous comment during our conversation, “Fanon had dealings with people like Lumumba,” can be understood in a similar vein. For she engages the ethically productive power of the sublime poetry and tragedy of Fanon’s text, of Djébar’s and Césaire’s, affirmatively. Is this the point of her ‘sabotage’ strategy of critical reading? If so, then let us postulate that this is the affirmative mode of writing and philosophy, and of truthful (as opposed to purely eliminative) philosophers. And let us include



Malcolm X in the context of Pan-Africanism, the Panthers, as well as Guevara, Salvador and Beatriz Allende, and Neruda’s poetry. Crucially, this is not at all different from what Kant found in Milton’s poetry. We may ask henceforth, what are the implications of the affirmative mode of writing philosophy in history?

“This is a very different kind of connection,” Spivak says. “Lumumba came from Belgian Congo, which is very different from French North Africa, where Fanon ended up. This is why Sartre couldn’t understand him. He was disgusted with Lumumba, dismissed him with one word. So we have to remember those connections as well, not just the story of being black, being an African revolutionary, and condoning violence.”

Listening to Spivak in conversation, there emerges an affirmative Fanon, the healer, in opposition to the purely eliminative Fanon and Lumumba, and Allende we get from Arendt, Sartre,

the neoliberals and the(ir) official story that represents them solely as purveyors of destructive violence. “If you look at the issue of *Présence Africaine* published in 1962 after Fanon’s death,” she says, almost whispering in my ear, “the one in which Aimé Césaire wrote Fanon’s obituary, Mâspero writes one also, it is a pretty sublime issue, you get a sense of how Fanon is absolutely not a clay figure of the African revolutionary condoning violence, etcetera. It’s just not on. I just want to say that to get a sense of the, excuse the word, reality of Fanon, it is worth reading what those close friends had to say about him. Before he was made into just such a clay figure.”

I listen carefully. Let us use another word. The one that Kant used. Let us say that Fanon is exemplarity as such.

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ON ANARCHISM, ALTERNATIVES & NON-VIOLENCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH TODD MAY

Interview conducted 6/29 – 2014

Cæcilie Varslev-Pedersen: How is it to live and work in South Carolina these days?

Todd May: It doesn't get easier. You see that a lot of the country is moving away politically. We don't have gay marriage. In fact, they're passing laws to make it harder to be gay. If gay marriage is going to come, it's going to come from federal order.¹ We are also completely nutso about drugs. People get arrested for bullshit charges related to weed. I mean... it's not only in the South that this

happens. The endorsement of guns is over the top. A student of mine who served in Iraq was saying to me that the endorsement of guns is so naïve. People talk about protecting themselves from the government. But if the government wants to send you under, there're not going to fire a bullet at you. They'll freeze your bank account, they'll turn off your water and electricity, and then they'll just going to wait for you to come out with your hands up. They're not even a little bothered by this. So when you ask how are things going in the South, it is in fact moving in the wrong direction.

CVP: That must be very depressing.

TM: Yes, that is very depressing. My daughter and I were talking about gay marriage and weed. She's saying they're coming to South Carolina and I bet her: you pick one of those two, either one, and I bet you it isn't here in twenty years. She was smart to bet on weed. Though she may be wrong about sexuality, because they made a court decision in Utah... But she picks weed on the theory that, if weed became legal and people smoked it, they would be: "ahhh, gay marriage – what the hell!" [He laughs heartily]. But this stuff's coming from on high. People in South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana; these people are not going say to themselves "oh yeah, gay folks, they're really equal". That's just not going happen. So if the question is whether it is still hard to be in the South, the answer is yes.

CVP: Those don't seem like very

promising conditions for anarchism. Where do you see anarchism today?

TM: Actually, I think it's an interesting period for anarchism, because with the demise of the hegemony of Marxist discourse as the alternative discourse, for the last 20 years of so things have in fact really opened up for the possibility of anarchism. What's happening is a bit strange. I think that there is a lot more anarchist organizing going on that doesn't call itself anarchist. And I think, at least from what I understand, from what little I've seen, that many self-identified anarchists are doing stuff that doesn't strike me as anarchist at all.

CVP: What are the main principles of anarchism, as you see it? And where are the self-identified anarchists failing?

TM: Well, organizing from the bottom up, presupposing the equality of everyone, recognizing that there isn't a single struggle, but a multitude of intersecting struggles. I think these would be three central elements of any practice of anarchism. The third one is also about a critique of domination as opposed to a critique of exploitation. In anarchism, the product has to reflect process [i.e. the process of the struggle]. You see this in a lot of current organizing. People know about the idea

of consensus decision-making, even though that's not necessarily anarchist. But in looking at that, they cultivate a sensitivity to others. I think that there is a recognition coming out of a self-identified Marxist perspective – in the wake of the failures of twentieth century revolutionary movements – that we can't simply think in terms of a revolution at the top. This has found its way into organizing. However, among many self-identified anarchists, it seems as though there is a regression into identity politics. That is to say, you don't get to speak about the experience of the disabled unless you're disabled, and gay unless you're gay. That seems to me to be entirely unhelpful in building a movement. If one could never understand – at least to an important extent – the experience of people who are very unlike oneself, then there would be no point for literature. So the trick is not to say that you can't understand it; the trick is to find out how you get people to understand it. Not to be totally inside a person's head, but to sort of see it a bit. I think it is entirely possible for a person who is not in the group to be able to get somebody else who is not in the group to see it. I don't see why,

organizing from the bottom up, presupposing the equality of everyone, recognizing that there isn't a single struggle, but a multitude of intersecting struggles. I think these would be three central elements of Anarchism.

at the outset, we should say that this is not a possibility. The trick is to become more sensitive rather than denying the possibility of sensitivity at the outset.

CVP: Where do you see these groups, which, according to you, are in fact anarchist, but don't identify themselves as ones?

TM: I think you see it all over. One place you saw it was with Occupy. Occupy was not a self-identified anarchist group, although they functioned on a lot of anarchist principles. I know there were anarchist organizers there, but there were all kinds of folks there. One of the things you really saw there was a sense of the necessity for presupposing equality. If you develop structures that presuppose equality and then see where or how we could build relationships with that: now you're building alternatives. I think that Occupy was extremely important. People talk about it as a failure. However, if you change the discourse about income distribution in the US, the way this movement did, I don't see how you are a failure.

They didn't get equality, but they got people to talk about it.

So Occupy would be one example. I've also written on a small co-op in South Carolina, near me. It's a food co-op. They treat everybody equally, and they work on anarchist principles. Although there isn't a person within this place that, if you told them that they were anarchist, wouldn't just run screaming out the door. So it is all over. I think it's in the air and I think it's in the air in progressive movements. I mean, I don't need people to call themselves anarchist. That doesn't matter. What I need is politics that recognizes the principles that seem to me to be important to anarchism.

CVP: Why do you think anarchism is in the air right now?

TM: That's a good question, Cille. I don't know. Certainly the opening was created by the failure of Marxist movements in the twentieth century. But you can't help thinking it must be more.

CVP: Yes, but there is also a resurgence in critiques of capital right now, isn't there?

TM: Yes, and that's important in a period of neoliberalism. The Marxist analysis of the dominance of capitalism is important. It's not that we do away with that analysis. But what we are talking about now is not only an analysis of capital, but also the creation of alternatives. The creation of alternatives, I think, has to happen on the basis of bottom-up

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movements. These movements just aren't there in the history of Marxism. So it's not that we throw Marx out the door. There's a lot of important analysis that Marx has given us. However, I think that inasmuch as Marxists want to reduce social reality to what they analyze, that's a mistake. But nevertheless I think it's really important. I'm halfway through Thomas Piketty's book. It's great. It's very long, but he writes really well. There's something of the Marxist inspiration there. I mean, Piketty is not a Marxist, but one of the essential ideas of the book – that inequality is created so that those on the top gain at the expense of those at the bottom – is not an idea that would be foreign to Marx.

CVP: Could you explain how exactly the Marxist tradition has failed? What are its failures? And how does anarchism transcend these failures?

TM: As I said, it isn't that the Marxist tradition does not offer insights. It's failure lies rather in its reductionism. In much of the Marxist tradition, all domination is conceived in terms of exploitation. That leads to two important problems. First, it involves a

failure to recognize other forms of domination. Second, it leads toward an elite avant-garde view that the experts in the Archimedean point of exploitation should lead the masses. We know the history of that view from the legacy bequeathed to us by the twentieth century. Anarchism avoids these problems by seeing exploitation as only one form of domination. Thus, it allows for the integrity of various intersecting struggles and refuses to posit an avant-garde party as necessary for struggle. It also carries with it, related to this, the insight that the product of struggle must be reflected in the process.

CVP: Is the revival of anarchism an American affair? Across the third world, anarchism has less appeal.

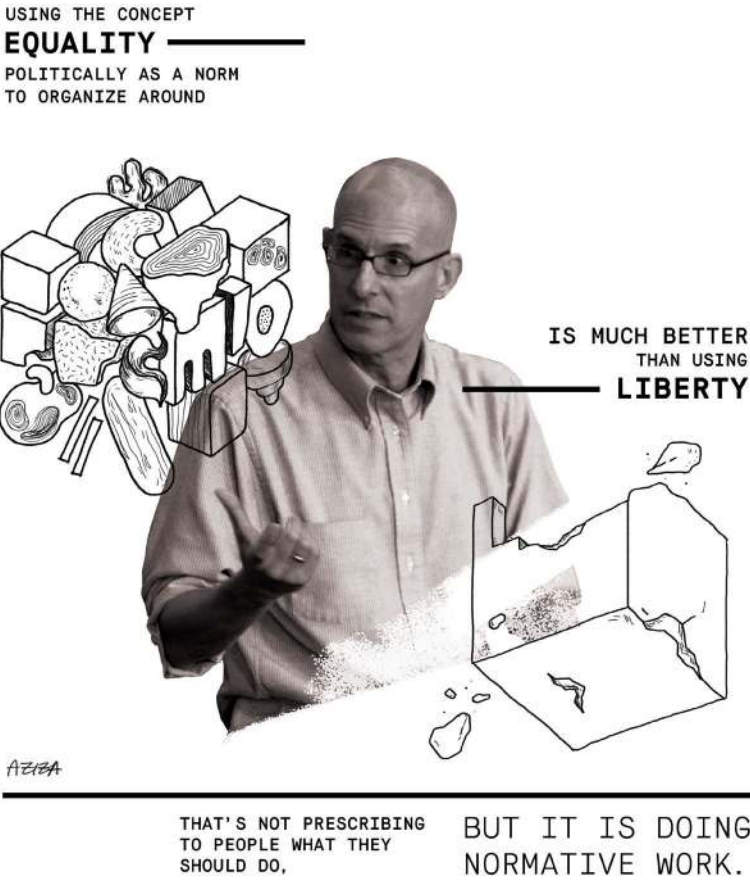
TM: I am not sure what to say here. I suspect that it is not entirely an American affair. I know there is interest in anarchism in the UK, Turkey, Israel and Palestine, Italy, Denmark, and elsewhere. But I am not an expert on the various anarchist movements, and so don't want to commit myself on the extent of its appeal outside the US.

CVP: You have recently written a book in which you suggest that friendship can be a way of resisting neo-liberalism, and a couple of months ago, in New York, you gave a paper on non-violent forms of resistance. Foucault is famous for stating – quite vaguely – that 'where there's power,

there's resistance'. Would it be right to say that this conception of resistance is very central to your thought? And if it is, how is it situated in your poststructuralist anarchism?

TM: Let me say something that I think would help frame all this. There's a tendency in theoretical work to do critique. To say what's wrong and to analyze what's wrong. There's a tendency for books and articles to say: "here's another thing that is really bad". You know, you haven't thought of this other thing which is also terrible, and this other thing sucks, and here's another way in which it sucks. In almost all of my work, I have been looking for alternatives. Ok, so there are plenty of people out there telling us how bad things are, and why they are bad – and Foucault was among them. We need that analysis, but we also need to think about what

the alternatives are. So the post-structuralist anarchism was really a beginning attempt to frame the alternative. I was saying, look, if we put this in the anarchist frame, then we can begin to see not only what's wrong, but also how we might move on. Resistance is an idea that is, in Foucault particularly, a placeholder. He very rarely says anything about it. So the question is: in light of what Foucault tells us about what's wrong, how might we think about alternatives? I think this was also what drove me to Rancière, because his notion of equality was really helpful in framing thoughts about resistance.² I'm still trying to sort this out, over twenty years after the poststructuralist anarchism book. But I've also tried to move a little bit closer to the ground, so my second book about Rancière³ is about 'movements'. Right, so here are some specific movements, and this is



I also think that there are philosophical issues, which can be sorted out in terms of positive programs. So I've argued that using the concept "equality" politically as a norm to organize around is much better than using "liberty". That's not prescribing to people what they should do, but it is doing normative work.

how they do this. The friendship book⁴ was also an attempt to say: in a neoliberal context, which often seeks to colonize our relationships, how might we think of alternatives? If we look at friendships, we can see themes that resist neoliberalism and therefore might give us a basis for thinking about alternatives. In nothing I write am I interested simply in critique. And I'm not interested in coercing people, but I am interested in offering alternatives, so that people can be offered a vision of where to go.

CVP: Would you say, then, that you're rather optimistic about resistance today?

TM: No, I'm not terribly optimistic about it. I think it's a very difficult period, and I think it is difficult in a lot of ways. I think the neoliberal discourse has a deep grip on culture. To give you an example:

before the re-election of Obama, I said that if I had a choice simply based on domestic and especially economic policy, not foreign policy, between Obama and Richard Nixon, I'd voted for Nixon. Because Nixon was well to the left of Obama. Politics has moved so far to the right. The other thing is that our situation has been overshadowed by the environmental crisis, and I think this is very dangerous. I don't think we're getting near to beginning to address this. So it's not that I'm optimistic. It's just that if we don't try to think about alternatives, then for sure we'll never get anywhere. It seems to me that this is at least one step we have to take, whether or not it's going to work out. I'll put it this way: we don't know if it's going to work out if we take the step, but we know what will happen if we don't.

CVP: You said in another interview that you didn't think it was up to the political philosopher to make a political program.

TM: Yes.

CVP: What can they do instead?

TM: Well, I think what they can do is this... I think they can do more than Foucault thought they could do. Foucault said that the job of the philosopher, or the job of the intellectual, is to do analysis, to offer tools to those who struggle. I think there are two other things that can be done. One is that you can offer alternatives or beginning visions of alternatives. That's not the same thing as telling folks

where they should go. It's to offer visions that people can then look at critically. The friendship book tries to do that, the Rancière book tries to do that. We can do that, but I also think that there are philosophical issues, which can be sorted out in terms of positive programs. So I've argued that using the concept "equality" politically as a norm to organize around is much better than using "liberty". That's not prescribing to people what they should do, but it is doing normative work. So I think both in the case of positing positive things that people can consider in terms of action and in the case of doing normative work on the positive programs, there's stuff to be done. None of that requires, say, "the feminist movement needs to go here".

CVP: One concrete example of forms of resistance that you have studied is non-violent resistance. Your analysis of non-violence implies a critique of what you call 'the ethics of vulnerability', a position that you attribute to Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida..

TM: Yeah, Levinas in his ethical works, Derrida in those works where he follows Levinas' ethical lead, and maybe a bit of Butler, for instance in Precarious Life.

CVP: How does your view on non-violence differ from the view of these thinkers?

If oppression knows no borders, neither does resistance.

TM: Gandhi said that people mistakenly think that non-violence is the weapon of the weak. But it's not. When non-violence is done well, although it might require some forms of sacrifice, it can be very powerful. So it isn't just that you're calling for recognition for something; you can actually put people in a position where it is almost impossible for them to do anything else. But the ethics of vulnerability gets things backward: for it, the power of non-violence lies in the vulnerability of the person committing it [i.e. violence]. So for instance, at the lunch counter sit-ins in the American civil rights movement, people came and sat down to lunch and clearly they were very vulnerable. People started to throw food and ketchup on them, but what happened was that the people who did this found themselves morally cornered because of how they acted. The people at the lunch counter sit-ins pretty much knew that this was going to happen, so it was not really their vulnerability [which was at stake in the example], it was their ability to put people in a position that was morally impossible for them that mattered. To put the point in another way, it was the power of the non-violent actors in using their vulnerability, rather than the vulnerability itself, that constituted the dynamic of non-violent resistance. So I think that when the proponents of the ethics of vulnerability we're talking about the person intending to

commit violence as responding to "the call of the other" – and about, "responding to the other" as such – , this isn't really capturing the dynamic of what is going on in non-violence. CVP: You don't think that non-violence makes one vulnerable, so you seek to develop a more active account of non-violence, is that correct? TM: Yeah, yeah, it's very active. You know people say that in non-violence you put yourself in a position where you are vulnerable because you don't have a weapon, but people with guns, in war, seem to be fairly vulnerable. It's not like the gun gives you that much protection. If people say, well, people are going to die in non-violence campaigns, I'm thinking they'd die in any kind of campaigns; the question is whether you have an opportunity with your non-violent campaign of actually being able to making a change. There is a recent book by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan called *Why Civil Resistance Works*. They studied various movements over the past hundred and some years and found that non-violent campaigns are generally far more

likely to be effective in many areas than violent ones. CVP: You're not a pacifist, you've said. So this is not the only way, or even the main way, one should resist? TM: No, I'm not a pacifist. I think there are situations where non-violence is simply not going to work. And also there are justifications for violence. I think there're two things at play in such cases. One is that non-violence doesn't seem to have a reasonable chance of working in some cases. That's going to depend on the specifics of the situation. The other one is where the harm being done is egregious enough, and if it's justified to take violence to do something about it, then I think it's fine to do violence. I have no problem with that. Although I'm not a fan of the Hezbollah, they drove Israeli troops out of southern Lebanon with violence, and it's not clear to me that anything else would have worked. The Israelis were in a foreign country, they thought they could take it over, and the Hezbollah reasoned that if enough of the Israelis died, they'd think it was not worth it any more, and that's more or less what happened. --

CVP: It seems to me that there is this very political part of your work, and then there is this other part. You've written on friendship, on death, on the meaningfulness of life, and on romantic

love, and all these "existential topics". Are these kinds of topics something academic philosophy doesn't pay enough attention to? TM: No, I think it's there. I think they do pay attention to it. I'm just trying to make my own contributions. The theologian Harvey Cox wrote a book called *Feast of Fools*. Something he said in the first three pages has always stayed with me. He said that there are life celebrators and there are world changers. Life celebrators look at life, and they see what's beautiful and what's good, and they try to celebrate that. World changers look at the world, and they see what's bad, and they try to make it better. What Cox said – and this seems to me exactly right – was that the trick is to find out how to balance those two. So if you're just a life-celebrator with no world changing in you, then you're not recognizing all the suffering that's going on. It's ignorance. But perhaps more dangerous is the world changer who can't celebrate life, because they think everything is bad and that they know where to go... These people become the solemn revolutionaries. People like that are frightening because, when they get power, nothing good ever happens. In my work, I try to do existential questions and life celebrating and to write on world changing. I've noticed now, and I haven't before, that I tend to do one after the other. So I tend to do one life celebration, then a world changing.

Interview conducted 6/29 – 2014

Selected works by Todd May

- *The Political Philosophy of Post-structuralist Anarchism*. USA: Penn State U.P., 1994.
- *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*. Chippenham, UK: Edinburgh U.P., 2008.
- *Death: The Art of Living*. New York: Acumen, 2009.
- *Contemporary Political Movements and the thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action*. Chippenham and Eastbourne, UK: Edinburgh U.P., 2010.
- *Friendship in an Age of Economics: Resisting the Forces of Neoliberalism*. USA: Lexington Books (Rowman & Littlefield), 2012.

Other books mentioned in interview:

- Judith Butler: *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- Harvey Cox: *Feast of Fools. A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*. Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1969.
- Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan: *Why Civil Resistance Works. The Strategic Logic of Non-violent Conflict*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

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We dedicate this issue to Vidrohi, the rebel poet
(December 1957 – December 2015).

He lived among the students of Delhi inciting justice in each
movement, each word, each gesture. Fittingly, Vidrohi died while
taking part in a protest by students against the injustices of the
government's education system. Laal Salam Vidrohi.

**My people have ordained that I
Snatch the moon and the stars from the sky
Or that for those who cannot afford fire
I bake their bread in the sun's pyre**

**Had it been about me, I wouldn't care
But I cannot help as it's a view we share
I do not have the courage, my friends
And to ignore this order, I do not dare**

**So I shall dig the earth and bury the gods
I shall slay the prophets and the priests
These are the beautiful days of our youth
Let us live our lives, let us fight for rights
Your world can go to hell, my god, I couldn't care less
Let us create a new world, a new existence.**

**So that Man can live as he deserves to
Speak, listen and endure each other too
If death dances drunk, let it come and sway
So that the value of Life is not wasted away.**

- Nayi Duniya

