
Just Demanding

An Encounter with:
Simon Critchley. *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London: Verso, 2007. 224 pages.

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Eschewing the jargon of much academic political philosophy, Simon Critchley sets out in *Infinitely Demanding* to formulate an ethics of political resistance that borrows from his engagements—some better, some worse—with the philosophies of Kant, Marx, Freud, Levinas, Lacan, Badiou, Laclau, and others, while offering prose that proves thankfully less-than-infinitely demanding for his readers. Notably missing from the book is reference to Jacques Derrida, whose work Critchley became known for covering in his texts of the 1990s. And though his thinking of ethics here is inflected by Derrida’s readings of Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics” and *Adieu*, and though Critchley at times references a questioning of the sovereignty and mastery of the subject that was central to Derrida’s work before his death in 2004, it is clear that Critchley has finally come around to the task he set for himself in 2000: what must be done, beyond the work of Derrida, he argued, is to think “the ethical imperative of the democracy-to-come together with more concrete forms of democratic political deliberation, action, and intervention” in working towards the “endless betterment of actually existing democracy” (“Remarks” 464). What results is an insightful and crucial book on the necessity and promise of political engagement.

For Critchley, modern politics is divided between active and passive nihilisms. The passive nihilist attempts a “mystical stillness” and “calm contemplation” in the shadows of contemporary Empire and the light of the society of the spectacle that seems to make any political action useless (*Infinitely Demanding* 5). Critchley cites the later Rousseau here, famous for his paranoid meditations along his beloved garden paths after being shut out of the city of Geneva. But we can quickly add other thinkers to this list: the later Heidegger and his followers, content with continued meditations on art, language, and technology while being afraid to deliver anything but the most abstract phrases (“the polis is the place of being”) about the political. There is the later work of Foucault, which retreated from contemporary discussions of power into the problems of subjectivity in the ancient and medieval world. There is also the work of Julia Kristeva, who in the last ten years has published a trilogy on revolt and revolution, but notably finds these revolts in the literary works of various authors while calling for a micro-politics in which we, via psychoanalysis, are to tend, as did Rousseau, our own “inner gardens” given our powerlessness in light of the failures of liberalism. There are also—and Critchley hints at this himself in previous works—thinkers using deconstruction happy to speak about the democracy-to-come as an imperative to act, here and now, for a better politics, all the while unable to be “engaged” in bringing such a politics about. On the other hand, Critchley identifies an “active nihilism”—he paints with a brush as broad as in the first case—that tries “to destroy this world,” which is found meaningless, in order to “bring another into being” (5). Here, Critchley not only discusses bin Laden, but also Lenin, Blanqui, the Maoists, the Weather Underground, and, lest he is left out of any such list, George W. Bush. The reader is thus forewarned early that, whatever radicality Critchley’s text will claim, whatever political action it will

call for, it will be charting a third way between these two forms of nihilism in order to “invent” “new political subjectivities ... that call into question the authority and legitimacy of the state” while foreclosing a return and rethinking of previous radical movements. This “invention” of “new multiplicities,” Critchley will argue, must be passive, peaceful, and non-violent—yet anarchic. In responding to the infinite ethical demand of the other, we must maintain an “ethics of discomfort.” The question, though, is whether Critchley is ultimately led to an all-too-comfortable political theory, one that can speak the language of solidarity (without “consensus”) with movements in the developing world, while still cautioning passivity and pacification in the face of neo-colonialism. This all while favoring a politics of comedy that would mark dissent by way of what he calls a “tactical frivolity” that might seem to some readers to be too frivolous. We will come back to this point.

What Critchley provides is a sustained indictment of political quietism, whether it is what he calls the “European Buddhism” of political retreat or the destruction of the political by groups bent on violence, whether “legitimated” through state sovereignty or not. The silencing of the political, Critchley avers, takes shape in the face of that least quiet of state apparatuses, namely modern liberal parliamentary democracy, in which everything is said but radical change is fundamentally unavailable. Politics, though, is not to be found in the procedures and false choices offered by latter-day democracies. Rather, “politics is the manifestation of dissensus, the cultivation of an anarchic multiplicity that calls into question the authority and legitimacy of the state” (13). This manifestation of dissensus, taking the non-form of political anarchy, Critchley argues, needs to be anchored in the fundamental “anarchy” of ethical subjectivity. Whereas Levinas himself linked his own ethics of the other—however anarchical—to a rather conservative politics (with rather dubious views of women and Palestinians, among others),

Critchley argues that a Levinasian ethics can make up for the “motivational deficit” found in the face of today’s political disenchantment, and thus can be linked to a “leftist populism.” It is the call of the other, Critchley rightly argues, that should awaken us out of our political stupor, or at the very least leave us a little less interested in cultivating our personal gardens while political and economic oppression continues unabated. As such, Critchley’s work is ambitious—and needless to say, it’s time for political philosophy to return to ambitions worthy of political events, and not argue, as does Alain Badiou, that politics is merely an ephemeral, rare event that could occur without us knowing it. “Such a position,” Critchley argues, is “defeatist” (131).

Infinitely Demanding charts its way from the rough waters of one anarchy (ethical) to another (political). That Critchley looks for an ethical basis for political thinking (what he calls the ethics of “metapolitics”) is not new. Kant is but one preeminent example of a politics led by the categorical imperative of ethics. For Critchley, the essential feature of ethics is the relation between the demand put upon a subject and how that subject then binds itself to some “good” in order to meet this demand (17). In examples culled from the experiences of Bob Geldof (yes, of Band-Aid fame) to Jesus Christ, Critchley argues that ethics must be “motivated” and motivational. The subject is nothing other than a commitment to some good, and it is this “demand of the good” that “*founds* the self” (20, Critchley’s emphasis). As such, as subjects, we are not masters of ourselves, as in the Kantian framework. Indeed, it is not enough to acknowledge the *Faktum* of reason, as in the Kantian moral law, and then leave aside empirical consequences for thinking the morality of one’s actions. Rather the subject is one that is committed to some good, faithful to the event in Alain Badiou’s terms, in order to better the situation of the other and others to whom one always and unendingly owes a response.

Subjectivity, Critchley argues, “is not just an aspect or dimension of subjective life,” but is rather “the fundamental feature of what we think of the self, the repository of our deepest commitments and values” (23). This means that the self, following Derrida and Levinas, is not autonomous and self-ruling, but constantly an-archival, that is, displaced and repositioned from outside itself through its responses and responsibility to others; the *archē* or principle of the self comes from the *outside*, as Levinas, Løgstrup, and Derrida have argued. But there is also an *other* inside, and here Critchley turns to Lacan in order to bring together both psychoanalytic and Levinasian notions of trauma. For too long, Critchley argues, philosophy has followed along a repetition of a tragic arc, whether it is the ultimately frailty of our finitude in Kant and Heidegger or the “self-lacerating masochism” in the face of the other that many find in Levinas’s ethics. This tragic arc, Critchley argues, should be inverted into a thinking of a certain comedy of being, in which the subject recognizes its divided self, mocking itself from the outside, as it were, marking the “human being’s *eccentricity* with regard to itself” (86). In this way, the demand of the other need not be a suffocating trauma. Rather, comedic self-regard can sublimate—though not occlude—the infinitely demanding relation to the other, marking our lack of self-mastery while allowing us to go on, as we must, in meeting our ethical demands.

Kantian and other philosophies, Critchley ultimately claims, have left us, tragically, with a “motivational deficit” in which we “experience the moral claims of our societies as externally compulsory, but not internally compelling” (39). This may be. And it is true, as Critchley claims, that much of contemporary philosophy suffers from an “autonomy orthodoxy” that defends the supposed sovereignty of the self, which inevitably becomes linked to all sorts of sovereigntisms at the national and international level. But I’m not sure that this ethical anarchism leads to the “good” of a political anarchism rolled out in the second half of his book. In other words, why *this*

good over any particular other? Is not the sad spectacle of the anti-abortionist the result of someone completely in thrall to the demand of some fetal other? Following up on the theologian Knud Ejler Løgstrup's Levinasian notion of the infinite demand of the other, Critchley writes, "I experience a radical demand and try to shape my subjectivity in relation to it. Whether the demand ultimately emanates from God, the abyssal void at the heart of being, the fairies at the bottom of my garden, or some other occult source is something we cannot know" (55). This problem is simply, for Critchley, beside the point: "Instead, the focus should be on the radicality of the human demand that faces us," which we will always fail to live up to. "Failure is inevitable," he writes, "for we can never hope to fulfill the radicality of the ethical demand" (55). Certainly, Critchley is right to suggest that ethics does not rise to the level of the "true or false," since how does one begin to measure one's failure, one's "truth" in the face of the infinite demands of the other? But it is also the case that it does matter whether this good to which the subject responds is *good*. The subject is nothing other than a response to the other, yes. But not all responses are the same.

In order to think this "good," Critchley turns to Marx, whose work denotes, for him, the *sine qua non* of appraising "contemporary socio-economic life." Here, Critchley's touch is less adept, providing cursory readings of the *Manifesto* and parts of other texts so as to side with Marx's analysis of the commodification of the human being, even as he leaves to the side a temptation to fall into a passive nihilism by which one waits for the contradictions of capitalism to unleash and liberate the proletariat. We can leave aside for now whether, as Critchley argues, the whole of Marx's work ultimately bows to an historical teleology and to an ontology of a human essence to be found in the human "species-being" (a view contested by the whole force of

Marx's work on historical change and development, such that there is no "natural" essence of the human). We can also leave aside long-debated arguments over the meaning of the proletariat in his writings. But certainly, a reinvigorated "populist" resistance, as Marx himself would note, needs a grounding in economic analyses that lay bare the material conditions of twenty-first century economies, which can account for the very 19th-century-like conditions in the factories of the developing world while marking the nexus of technological globalization and economic and political dislocations found across the globe. The contemporary literature on this is too rich and varied to begin to list here.

In the end, given economic dislocations and the continuing and parallel, though seeming paradoxical, disseminations of capital and centralizations of sovereign power, how does one resist? What, in short, is to be done? Critchley argues that the answer is to form Gramscian hegemonies that takes a distance from the state, that is the "*creation* of interstitial distance within the state territory" in order "to open up a space of opposition." This would be the "true democracy" as it can exist now, given the problems of the modern nation-state. Politics must operate anarchically—the political corollary of Critchley's ethical anarchy—not in the name of reckless freedoms Critchley dubiously ascribes to the revolutionary movements of the 1960s. Where the state seeks consensus, Critchley argues that "democratization is a dissensual praxis that works against" the state. This praxis acts at both the micro-political level while forming alliances that operate across borders at the macro-political and trans-national level. An anarchical politics would do what an anarchical ethics already does at the level of the self, namely bring into question any calls to a supposed sovereignty. It is the "continual question from below of any attempt to establish order from above" (123). Pointing to such groups as the satirical "Billionaires for Bush," who protested across the USA in 2004 wearing 1920s-style tuxedos with

top-hats and evening gowns while offering, among other things, to auction off social security to the highest bidder, Critchley argues that open ridicule may be the last, best strategy of the powerless in the face of power. Critchley himself ridicules what he considers the “pious humerlousness” of other groups (must one find a humorous way to protest torture?), and he argues that modern protest groups ought not to mimic the “archic” violence, what he deems the active nihilism, of the power structures they wish to subvert. While anger, he argues, is the first and most appropriate political emotion, political groups must cultivate a “*pacifist* activism that deploys techniques of non-violent warfare or what we might even call “tactical frivolity” (124).

This is where a more sustained analysis of systemic violence is missing. One cannot think political resistance without recalling both why it is, given the events of the last years, both rather rare and ineffectual. Critchley mentions Marx without mentioning ideology; he mentions the Freudian superego, without discussing the cultural matrix in which the superego is formed; he mentions Foucault, without countenancing seriously his notions of discipline and power. Thus the political—or at the very least the social—contaminates, if not creates, the “ethical” subject from the very start. A thinking of the problems of the motivated subject must begin here, not just with the problems of modern parliamentary democracies. Finally, one must take seriously the claims of supposed “active nihilists” who argue that operating within a system of violence—while calling for all others to put down their arms—is but another form of supposed radicalism that keeps this violent system in place. “This is a difficult pacifism,” Critchley argues, “that constantly has to negotiate the limits of violence” (125). No doubt. But though it is politically less demanding to call for the protestors to pull out their tops hats instead of grenades, we must not reduce resistance to being what some may see as being jesters to our latter-day sovereigns

and neo-colonialists. The task for politics now, as ever, is to continue—at a distance from the state, as Critchley suggests—to negotiate the limits of violence, since all resistance is a form of violence to sovereign supposition. This is indeed an infinitely demanding exercise where justice demands one stay as far as possible from giving into the temptation of violence and terrorism in resistance movements. But this place at the margins of violence and pacifism may be just where an ethics of commitment takes us.

Other Work Cited

Critchley, Simon. “Remarks on Derrida and Habermas,” *Constellations* 7, no. 4 (2000): 455-465.