

Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

GIJS VAN OENEN

POSH ANARCHISM

Review of: Simon Critchley (2007) *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London: Verso, 168 pp.

Krisis, 2008, Issue 2
www.krisis.eu

Many essays in cultural criticism start from some form of contemporary *Unbehagen*. In a slight variation on this theme, Simon Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding* starts from two kinds of contemporary *disappointment*. Religious disappointment, as we live in a godless world, and political disappointment, as we live in a violently unjust world (2-3). Religious disappointment leads to the 'active nihilism' of revolutionary vanguardism, especially that of al-Qaeda. The appeal of both al-Qaeda and their detractors, such as the present Bush administration, is that they manage to overcome, sidestep, or make up the 'motivational deficit at the heart of secular liberal democracy' (7-8). This *motivational deficit* is Critchley's core business in this short but powerful new book. Although it is religiously and politically situated, Critchley feels it to be primarily a *moral* deficit, 'a lack at the heart of democratic life that is intimately bound up with the felt inadequacy of official secular conceptions of morality' (8). What Critchley sets out to find is a conception of ethics that accepts the motivational deficit as an inevitable product of modernity itself, without embracing the fundamentalism of Bush and al-Qaeda.

Critchley wants to counter the inevitable motivational deficit of modernity by reverting to a post-modern conceptualization of ethical experience. In an elegant and erudite exposition in chapter 1, he shows how ethical experience has been misconceived by Kant, who could only justify the moral law by referring to the *Faktum der Vernunft*, the (non-empirical) 'fact' that subjects perceive the moral law as binding upon them. This induced later philosophers, from Hegel through Marx to Habermas, to find the *Faktum* implicit in *Sittlichkeit*, in the very praxis of social life, or in communicative action (30-31).

But Critchley takes all these solutions to be antiquated, modernist attempts to ground ethics in the principle of autonomy. People are no longer persuaded by the ethical convictions and political commitments they have established on their own authority as modern, emancipated subjects. The motivation must come from elsewhere. Experientially, Critchley argues accordingly, ethics is the *otherness* of a demand (33). Ethical experience entails that the self 'confronts a *Faktum* that places an overwhelming demand upon it' (37). For Critchley, ethics is thus about 'this moment of incomprehensibility', where the subject is faced with a demand that does not correspond to its autonomy (37).

The main outlines of such an 'ethics of heteronomy' are sketched through reference to Badiou, Levinas, and the little known Danish theologian Knud Ejler Løgstrup. From Badiou, Critchley takes the notion that the ethical subject is not self-constituting, but constituted by 'a demand that is received from a situation' (42). In other words, the Kantian *Faktum* is here something we encounter as an 'event' (46). But different from Badiou, Critchley argues that the commitment, or fidelity, to an event can and should be *justified*, which – in Kantian style – means that an ethics of heteronomy must be universalizable (48). But simultaneously, and this is derived from the work of Løgstrup, such an ethics is *overburdening*: it is radical, unfulfillable, and one-sided. The other person always stands higher than oneself (53). This implies inevitable ethical failure, and Levinas is called in to confirm that this is indeed the structure of ethical subjectivity itself. In an ethics of heteronomy 'responsibility precedes freedom' (56-57). My relation to the other 'persecutes me with its sheer weight', creating a 'traumatic neurotic' subject (60-61). To sum up, 'commitment to

fidelity (Badiou) to the unfulfillable, one-sided and radical demand that pledges me to the other (Løgstrup) can now be seen to be the structure of ethical subjectivity itself (Levinas)' (62).

Having reached the end of the second chapter, we now seem to be far removed from the quite militant and strongly political argument that got this book under way. How are we to get from the 'traumatic neurotic' ethical subject, that is moreover 'constitutively split between itself and a demand it cannot meet' (62), to the kind of new anarchist political ethics that Critchley eventually wants to establish?

This is dealt with through Lacanian psychoanalysis – one more detour before we finally get into the business of politics. Traumatic ethical separation, as psychoanalysis and more specifically Lacan teach us, requires aesthetic reparation through *sublimation* (69). The main problem with this approach – to cut the long and complicated exposition of chapter 3 short – is that it points towards *tragic* action as the authentic way to redeem split individuality. The ethics of heteronomy, however, requires that we perpetually forestall the possibility of authenticity. Critchley therefore argues for a notion of originary *inauthenticity* at the core of subjective experience, which requires comic acknowledgement rather than tragic affirmation as its ethical motivator (78-79).

This 'laughable inauthenticity' (82), finally, provides the link between 'an ethics of (infinitely demanding) commitment' and a 'politics of resistance' (89), the terms that jointly, and proudly, constitute the book's subtitle. Political remotivation starts, for Critchley, with the heterogeneous collection of 'anti-authoritarian groups' (90) that practice 'actually existing anarchism' (93). This is an 'anarchism of infinite responsibility' that arises from 'situations of injustice', and may be empirically witnessed in 'the carnivalesque humour of anarchist groups and their tactics of non-violent warfare' (93). Critchley calls this practice 'meta-political', as it finds its motivational force in an ethical moment.

Is such anarchist practice aimed at producing a better, or more just, society? – one might ask in the vein of Noam Chomsky, who put a similar question to Michel Foucault in 1971 in an interview on Dutch television,

where Foucault anarchically insisted that revolutionary activity should precisely *not* invoke the promise of a more just society. Critchley's anarchists do invoke justice – or at least the ethics of heteronomy responds to situations of injustice – but do not practice revolt, certainly not violent revolt. They are more adequately described as militant witnesses to injustice, who because of their 'laughable inauthenticity' must refrain from envisioning a just society. Critchley's favorite examples are groups like Ya Basta!, Rebel Clown Army, Pink Block, or Billionaires for Bush, who all 'perform their powerlessness in the face of power in a profoundly powerful way' (123-124).

Critchley's anarchist politics fall within the domain of what Jacques Rancière calls 'la politique', let's say informal politics, in contrast with the formal political sphere of 'le politique' (128-129). It is not difficult to see why. An ethics of heteronomy cannot hold the state to the same moral standards that the citizens have autonomously affirmed, as in Kant's transcendental idealism. As there is no such autonomous affirmation, and therefore as no such standards exist, the state must be 'anarchist' in its own, stately way, that is to say it must be authoritarian. Being a card-carrying anarchist, so to speak, Critchley finds that in principle 'the state is a limitation on human existence and we would be better off without it' (111). But as there is no revolutionary subject any more to do away with the state, or any other clear force that will make it 'wither away', politics should be conceived 'at a distance from the state'. Or rather, a 'distance within the state' that Critchley calls 'an interstitial distance, an internal distance that has to be opened up' (113).

Here I can sympathize with Critchley. The space of (meta)politics is not simply 'there' to be occupied; it must be *created* within the complicated 'texture' of institutional life, social forces, and political structures. This may create room for what we might call 'unruly practices', or as Critchley prefers to call it, 'wild democracy': practices that do not fit, or are excluded by, the normal texture of social and political life and exist, or subsist, as illegality, marginality, or (to revive that term) subalternity. 'True democracy would be the enactment of cooperative alliances, aggregations of conviviality and affinity at the level of society that materially deform the state power that threaten to saturate them' (117).


Spoken like a true anarchist. In line with Rancière, Critchley sides with ‘the people’, or better the excluded part of ‘the people’, that ‘cannot be socially identified and policed by any territorializing term’ (129). He also agrees with Rancière that politics is opposed to ‘the police’, a term which is perhaps best understood in its traditional, Hegelian sense as the network of institutions of civil society that aim to remedy its potentially destructive forces. It thus covers not only the police in the modern sense, but most of what we now know as municipal agencies and services, including social and cultural work, welfare, &c. Critchley’s most important disagreement with Rancière is not clearly set out and only alluded to (129), it seems to be about whether the kind of ‘metapolitical’ activities that Critchley recommends to us are to count as real politics.

Here I feel Critchley fails to speak as a true anarchist. A book that is as strongly and politically anarchist as this one should not let its message peter out into subtle philosophical quarrels about what does and what does not deserve to be called politics. The point, if I may attempt to summarize it very briefly, is that for Critchley many forms of ‘wild democracy’ qualify as anarchic practice and thus as politics, in the sense of ‘la politique’, while for Rancière ‘real’ politics should force a radical breakthrough from ‘la politique’ to the domain of ‘le politique’. We may well fear, however, that those readers best situated to understand Critchley’s point – academic philosophers – are the ones least likely to put it into practice. His point would have been better expressed by formulating a political theory of anarchism, or an anarchist manifesto. As it is, Critchley does not assert himself as an anarchist political activist, but as – merely – a ‘witness’: a witness to the (laughably inauthentic) militant witnesses to injustice. Or most concisely put: as a *metawitness*.

Come to that, should we not hold Critchley to the same standard that he applies to anarchic metapolitics? As a metawitness to the witnesses to injustice, does he manage to make himself laughably inauthentic? In other words, does he take his own medicine? If anything, the strange appendix on ‘crypto-Schmittianism’ (133-148) does everything to answer this question in the negative. Here Critchley both vilifies and commends the Bush Jr. administration for understanding that state politics is necessarily authoritarian, and identifies ‘military neo-liberalism’, neo-Leninism and

neo-anarchism as the ‘three live political options’ of the present time. This is dead serious, and anything but laughably inauthentic. In an ironic twist, it seems to me that it is not Critchley but his theoretical adversary Slavoj Žižek who succeeds best on Critchley’s own criterion, as he manages to be dead serious and laughably inauthentic at the same time, editing books with speeches by Lenin and Robespierre, but also being humoristic and paradoxical throughout. While I have more sympathy for Critchley’s anarchism than for Žižek’s Leninism, Critchley’s philosophical point remains best exemplified by Žižek. This seems slightly tragic, but perhaps it is better understood as, after all, laughably inauthentic.

Gijs van Oenen is senior lecturer in practical philosophy at the Department of Philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam and editor of *Krisis*.

 This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License

(Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0).

See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.