

____THESES
TO RAVACHOL

SUSPENDED TIME,
EXCEPTION AND
SPECTACLE



ANDITYAS SOARES DE MOURA COSTA MATOS

1.

“The Justice was done this morning at 4:05 without incidents or protests of any kind. He woke up at 3:40. The condemned refused the presence of the chaplain and declared that he had nothing to confess. Initially pale and trembling, he soon demonstrated an affected cynicism and exacerbation at the foot of the gallows moments before the execution. Loudly he quickly sang a short blasphemous and revoltingly obscene song. He did not utter the word ‘anarchy’, and when his head was placed in the hole, he uttered a last cry of ‘Long life to the Re...’ A complete calm reigned in the city. And so it happened as reported.” This is the telegram announcing the execution of Ravachol, guillotined by the French state on 11th July 1892 in Montbrison. Beyond the uplifting and austere tone emanating from that note luckily preserved, what is perhaps most disturbing is what it only obliquely demonstrates. Ravachol yelled the “Re...,” but the blade would not let the word be completed. A first hypothesis may indicate “Republic,” but most of the people maintain that it is obvious that he meant “Revolution.” It would be uncomfortable to admit that the terrible terrorist was silenced with the name of the Republic on his lips. This would simultaneously lead to: 1) wonder *which* republic a person like Ravachol would die for; and 2) justify the one we have. The capitalist mentality is never capable of answering a simple question, always attempting to justify its ignorance by glorifying what already exists. This procedure corresponds in every aspect to the most abject denial of the profound meaning of what the question, in its solitude, evokes.

2.

If Ravachol could be classified as a terrorist by the guardians of the capitalist order because he wanted to violently explode this same order, nothing prevents us from suspecting that beneath the rhetoric of human rights hides a religious fundamentalism, behind the allegedly representative democracy is erected the sovereign exception, and embedded in political freedom – like indiscernible viscera between fats – the freedom to consume and to be consumed is affirmed in the spectacle.

3.

The rule of law described in textbooks only exists in textbooks. If the historical construction of a technical-formal structure opposed to the absolute sovereignty of the state certainly played an essential role in safeguarding individual liberties characteristic of the first great revolutionary wave that began with France and the United States of America in the 18th century, then the time has come to critically assume this inheritance and admit that the process has run its course. Today we live in a state of exception. The visibility of this formation cannot be immediately perceived due only to the spectacle, which makes it seem as if we were still following the infinitely improving line of progress.

4.

The state of exception is between the factuality and the legality, without being identified with either of these two realities. Its practical “wisdom” stands in the way of any technical characterization to which one might point to define it. This “wisdom” consists in introducing the abnormality as predictable and certain, even if, paradoxically, to assert itself, the movement of the exception should deny all predictability and all certainty. That is why the spectacle and the exception are Siamese twins and, even if one does not give these phenomena these names, it is only in this way that they can be understood.

5.

The state of exception has a long and significant history whose focal point is the work of Schmitt, the first one to perceive it as an autonomous phenomenon. Even more: as a founding phenomenon. Affirming that the law is based on the *nómos* means to assert that it is beyond itself, demanding a primal violence on which all capitalist normativity depends. What the 20th century philosophy of law did was to ignore this perception and try to control the uncontrollable, as someone who sweeps the dirt under the carpet for years and, one day, is forced to deal with the pile of ruins that Benjamin called progress. Once activated, violence cannot be contained, only disguised and presented as *respectable* and *necessary*.

This is where the spectacle appears, belatedly denounced by Debord and, not by chance, completely forgotten by legal theorists. Today we could reverse the inversion of that resourceful one who said: where there is law, there is violence (*ubi ius, ibi vis*). Actually, it would be more accurate to say: where there is exception, there is spectacle.

6.

The spectacle is not merely a superior form of capitalism, not even its specialization or adornment. It refers to a new manner of experiencing time, that is, a new temporality. Only a total temporal formation as the spectacle, privileging contemplation and consigning to Tartarus any critical intransigence, might guarantee the world of doublethink on which the exception is based. If for Orwell War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery and Ignorance is Strength, for us Justice is Force, Privilege is Argumentation and Police is Love.

7.

The innumerable logical leaps demanded by the *spectacular exception* – this child of our times – are not even perceptible in a world where all quality has been quantified. The experience of something valuable or pleasurable becomes impossible when time is oriented by an uninterrupted continuity in which the present encompasses the past and the future. So, these are denied as specific fields of resistance against the exception that imposes a senseless and uncritical now-time concerning any revolutionary action, which only takes place *against* the tradition and remaining *open* to the constitutive unpredictability of tomorrow. With the spectacular exception, tradition itself crumbles and ceases to make sense. The past is no longer even a moment of the present, nor truth a moment of the false, as Debord had denounced. Living in a state of exception means that such categories – past and future, truth and lie – cannot be updated nor even understood. If what the French and Americans did at the end of the 18th century has any value, it is not due to the content of their ideas or to the allegedly libertarian character of their “revolutions.” Both people kept their slaves. The French overseas in Haiti, denying Blacks the rights proclaimed in the metropolitan revolution – not without the inconvenient protest of a Robespierre – because they did not bear the right skin color, and the Americans in their own territory, freed from

the British and immediately turned into their expanded simulacrum. What is valuable about these revolutions is that they deny the present and its alleged inevitability. This is precisely what we are unable to do today.

8.

Ravachol was a person that blew up buildings. In his days, he was called the “the voice of dynamite.” At the beginning of his memorable career, he stole from the poor to feed his mother and brothers but soon understood how the world worked and moved to the anarchist side. Maybe no one would remember him if it were not for a scathing reference from Kafka, who in a slightly innocent (and bourgeois) way thought of himself as a little Ravachol when he got lost on the streets of Prague and did not arrive at school on time. Nevertheless, nobody – not even Kafka – wondered why Ravachol set things on fire. Why our black blocs are black blocs is an equally chimerical, unanswerable question, at least for those who agree unhesitatingly with the moral order of the spectacle, and demand submission, ID cards, and family names of these boys and girls deprived of a future. Without even having heard the word, they know that Ravachol is not a name. And even if it was, it would have transformed into something else by becoming incendiary. His almost saintly face, taken from a Renaissance painting depicting the suffering Christ, is a symbol and sign of those who can neither be named nor appropriated. Our anarchist was the horror of anyone who felt safe. That is where radical philosophy should aim.

9.

Paul said he had fought the good fight. And he had kept the faith. Who among us might accuse, mystify, or ridicule him as only the human beings of other centuries and other fights deserve? Each day the good fight appears before us and we turn away. In a time of so much subjection, so many dogmatists and so little true or false beauty, the speech of a being like Paul of Tarsus may sound ridiculous. And not because he is a Christian and has somehow contributed to the establishment of the universal power of the Church in the consciences. What really bothers us today in people like Paul, Ravachol and Rosa Luxemburg is that they had a plan.

10.

No one can deny that the apocalypse will come. Sooner or later. The ancients said that the time is near and, actually, for them, our days would mean something completely different. Maybe they could be translated as the new time and the new land. However, perhaps the ancients would not understand that we are in a worse situation than they are because for us time has regressed. The revelation does not happen only under the model of the Christ Almighty crowned by terrible red angels who punish the wicked ones. Revelation is this: knowing that none of the things for which suffering humanity has fought make sense. Of course, this perception *needs* to generate not acceptance, but an ethical duty.

11.

Human beings are weak, would say an oracle who desired the attention of the mob. It would be difficult even to substantiate that claim. Precisely because it is an oracle, the oracle would not need to do that, since every prophecy is a lie centered on the present. A human being who could observe the progress that humanity has made over the millennia, with a vision free from the inevitable prejudices imposed by our times, certainly would go crazy. But there is no real progress as long as we keep killing each other, an insight that would mute anyone who maintained an ironic smile after understanding the previous sentence. The fact that we write or read this text and continue reading or writing texts is the final proof of our dishonesty or foolishness.

12.

Nowadays the life of a human being only gains meaning when it somehow becomes social. Not in the poor and pitiful sense of those who see themselves as imbued with the mission of saving their planet or only their neighborhood, but in a greater and even secret manner, because the spectacular exception, that selects for each one their respective seats in the universal audience of contemplation, cannot support those who decide to change seats and talk during the show. Especially if this talk is not about the show. What is expected from the good and behaved humanity is to accept the universal truth of the insignificance of each

one before the rigorous plan of continuous progress and its irrevocability. It is here then, in the act of denying the calm development of a clearly insane world, that resides the social significance of a life.

13.

Living like Ravachol or Debord means to become, in life, an insignia. The price to be paid for such insolence, the first one found it in the impassioned justification of theft and the plunder of goods buried with corpses, while the second one very often sought redemption at the bottom of a bottle. It is clear, however, that in the historical process of liberation of humankind from itself, these circumstances are no more than anecdotes, since what needs to be grasped and remembered is that there were, *in fact*, beings like Ravachol and Debord. This clarifies what a social life might be, which is often perceived as a paradox because the subjects who live it are usually the most critical and fierce detractors of any associative bond. Nevertheless, it is because they hold themselves in such high standards that these beings can point to the possibility of an escape from the universal monotony that underlies the pathetic spectacle of thousands of human beings who simply do not rebel. This would, by itself, justify subjects like Ravachol and Debord demanding a monthly salary from the municipalities in which they live, just like the one Socrates charged the Athenians who, notwithstanding, preferred to sentence him to death by hemlock.

14.

The general uselessness of any individual or particular action against the situation established in the world is equal to the difficulty of convincing people that they can make a difference. It is not the least of the system's tricks to know how to balance between the necessary universal infantilizing of the humans deprived of their history and the illusion of making them believe in the possibility of a voluntarist transformation of the conditions of existence in which their illusions are based. A revolutionary action that intends to emerge in this context should go beyond the mythology of the self-made man, understanding that any revolt should address the very heart of the quantified system of exchange which, since it has become universalized, requires an equally universal rival. Thinking globally and

acting locally might perhaps work if the consciousness that moves these actions is able to escape from the conditions that shape it as a separate consciousness and to propose as a problem nothing less than the whole world. It is clear that such a configuration can only take place as an act of faith.

15.

It is curious to note how most people demonstrate great sympathy for direct forms of exercising political power, only resigning themselves to giving up direct democracy under the argument that it is impossible in complex societies or that a certain degree of predictability and security is necessary in social relations, an objective that just apparatuses such as the rule of law could achieve. As for the first excuse, it does not even deserve an impugment, since the elements of “scale” and “complexity” are not the *causes* of the abandonment of the project of direct democracy, but its *consequences*. Concerning the second excuse, it is worth noting the extreme and cruel irony according to which people give up the free use of their lives in the name of security and predictability, subjective situations that are in fact constantly denied to them by the exceptional system of indirect democracy that claims to be fair and predictable. In the context of the state of exception, in which political representation today survives, every general rule may be suspended on behalf of emergency measures. These constantly change the rules of the game, so that it is no longer possible to talk about security as a goal, but only as a mere and reasonable reduction of risks (always imponderable). Therefore, people give up their liberties for nothing; or rather, they exchange them for a single, predictable certainty: that those who benefit from the capitalist system will always win the game.

16.

In the last pages of his *Panegyrique*, Debord notes that general decadence is at the service of the empire of servitude. More than that: only insofar as it is perceived as its *medium*, decadence can be called progress. Concerning servitude, what would characterize it in the present historical period would be its requirement that it must be appreciated in itself and not for the advantages it might bring. The simple pleasure of knowing it, and not any

promises of security, should now be enough to justify it. The old *strategós* published this in 1989, that is, when there was still some hope, and life, even if Debord insistently denounced it, had not yet become a total spectacle. Today, the technical conditions that make possible the immersion in spectacular time, fully identified with progress, not only demand that servitude justifies itself, but present it in an evident and unmistakable way as part of the vital process of the societies. It is due to this kind of magic that, in an epoch in which leisure is widely valued, it is converted into volunteer work for capital, and this without losing, but rather reinforcing the apparently free character of operations that consist in collaborating in the evaluation of hotels and restaurants on travel websites, in participating in online surveys and questionnaires, in expressing opinions – through pre-defined technological structures that transform all quality into quantity – in the spectacular network and in generally feeding the immense system of spectacular control while believing that we are having fun and “killing time.” If there is something valid in this last expression, it is its unconscious wisdom centered on the question of the unavailability of time. Insofar as it is dedicated to its own consummation and passage, it is effectively dead and can never be recovered, which only the experiences of a critical tradition and utopia could do.

17.

To de-potentialize the power, turning it democratic, means to open it up as a non-secret space. The power is strong because it is centered in the *arcana imperii*, the place of that which is not common and, therefore, privatized in the form of a violence that is always threatening because it is always evanescent and cannot be located.

18.

Only two hundred and a few years of secularism have been enough to completely destroy the understanding that politics only exists as a bet and, therefore, cannot be predicted and assured by calculations. There is an element in the political decision that is resistant to all rational analysis and that assumes the tragic meaning of the blind decision. This is what the ontologies of the order intend to deny by assuming the possibility of calculation. It

cannot be seriously disputed, however, that a life free of chains and patterns presents itself as a considerable challenge, even on the purely individual level. How many of us could survive without routine and the assignment of tasks? If they had free time, humans would perhaps use it for nothing but inventing new schemes that would bring them security and predictability, certainty and a warm bed waiting for them at the end of each laborious journey handed over to chance. Nevertheless, if the need for security were integrated into human life as a part of a greater game in which one bets, it would not cause any further problems and it would even be fun. The problem occurs when, in the face of suspended time and the lack of gods, the whole reality seems to turn into an insipid supermarket: there are the soaps, to the left the vegetables, and do not miss the chocolate section, enjoy the attractive discounts when buying a twelve-piece load of the same toilet paper and be sure that in the end, the cashier will charge you no more and no less than the result of all the calculations you have endlessly made while choosing your favorite products and consider not only if your money will be enough to pay for them, but fundamentally if they are really worth it. What the revolution needs to do is to convert the supermarket into a medieval fair and, ultimately, into a *potlatch*.