The risks of hermeneutic politics

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Although not a political philosopher in any strict sense, Gianni Vattimo consistently aligns his hermeneutics, broadly but nonetheless explicitly, to a radical left politics. His 'postmodern' refusal of metaphysical foundations to knowledge, the insistence that all arguments are interpretations, and that all interpretations are grounded in the openness of Being, for him support a formulation of Nietzschean 'nihilism' as exemplifying an intrinsically emancipatory logic. The steady dissolution of established truth claims in modernity, he argues, undermines the appeal to self-evident authority and permits the 'weakening' and 'distortion' — or refashioning — of even those principles we take as central to modern life (for example, equality, justice and freedom). What modernity reveals is not a 'natural' inclination of humans to exist one way or another but, instead, a disconcerting freedom to make and remake that existence. It discloses a capacity to transform our interpretations — of ourselves, our futures, our worlds — such that we might live with greater awareness of the possibilities of Being and avoid the violence that ensues when those possibilities are, one way or another, erased. For Vattimo, the primary philosophical task has been to insist on the emancipatory thread in the logic of modernity's unfolding and that is so in this collection, *Essere e dintorni*, as much as in any other of his works. Not surprisingly, most of the essays in this volume invite the reader to acknowledge political issues and orientations that are posed through a hermeneutical attitude. But, for this reader at least, these otherwise stimulating provocations never satisfactorily acknowledge (let alone resolve) the risks that arise when politics is posed through the critique of metaphysics.

The paradoxical character of Vattimo's left hermeneutics is visible from the start in the appeal he makes to, of all philosophers, Martin Heidegger as his central inspiration. Vattimo takes up Heidegger's ontological critique of 'metaphysics' — principally, his rejection of the reduction of Being to a particular kind of entity or being. Our interpretations are not merely mental dispositions but, rather, modes of 'being-in-the-world'. We reason, conjecture and communicate not in a neutral space or inside a universal framework but always from within horizons of significance conferred by history and culture. Our interpretive frameworks are rooted not in some fixed, eternal order but against a backdrop of traditions and values that dispose us towards particular futures and thus particular sets of possibilities (and against

others). Far from existing as an entity with objective contours and measurable qualities, our Being is bound, fundamentally, to the ‘event’ (*Ereignis*) of human existence, a contingent happening that projects us forwards. But that disposition — disclosed via language and art, as well as in our recurring moods, preoccupations and practices — never fully captures us or holds us to a predetermined path. The event of being sustains an openness to what comes, to an unforeseeable future that is never fully revealed, and so remains always in question. That means that there is no 'logical conciliation’, no final 'objective truth’ or epistemological ‘metalanguage’, as Vattimo underlines, to smoothen our contradictory interpretations of our moral and political priorities (34). Hermeneutics might not endorse revolution, he points out, but it grasps the ‘ontological necessity of conflict’ (37) as revelatory of human existence being founded on the ‘risky' ground of shared values and commitments.

But Vattimo acknowledges that Heidegger’s rendering of his ontology was, at a political level, deeply problematic. Heidegger's subscription to Nazism and his desire for Germany's national renewal contrasts radically with Vattimo’s own emancipatory leanings. The publication of his *Black Notebooks* indicates beyond all doubt that Heidegger was deeply complicit with national socialist fantasies, however short-lived his explicit allegiances might have been. While at the end of this volume Vattimo defends Heidegger from the some of the grander denunciations of his critics, there is no justification, he underlines, for what he calls Heidegger’s ‘colossal self-misunderstanding’ (60). Nonetheless he insists that Heidegger’s choice, however appalling, remains instructive. Philosophers, he had demonstrated, cannot separate off from the world and its political choices if, like him, one rejects taking a privileged standpoint of truth beyond them. Despite Heidegger’s hopes for a nationalist response to the purported, metaphysical ills of modernity, argues Vattimo, the question of being remains open for us and the philosophical challenge he posed is one to which we still need to respond (67).

More useful to Vattimo’s project is the later Heidegger’s construal of technological thinking as the primary threat to Being. The subsumption of social priorities and human interactions to purportedly ‘neutral' forms of calculation, prediction and control supplies the central obstacle to a positively affirming ontological attitude. Vattimo sees in this concern of Heidegger's a vital point of reference for grasping the globalising world of neoliberal capitalism and the attendant political delusions of the current age. The increased preference for a technological politics (whether in Italy under technocratic governments, or more widely in the use of global

institutions and neoliberal economics) and the obsessive ‘securitisation' politics under President GW Bush following the Iraq war of 2003 resembles the technological thinking that Heidegger warned would stop us properly questioning metaphysics. Reduced to objects of monitoring and calculation, such techniques and discourses close down political conflict and contain its threat to the narrow interpretation of freedom and democracy promoted by the so-called 'Washington consensus'.

Vattimo’s response to the technocratic tendencies of globalisation is to endorse a democratic politics from below. In this he looks primarily to the experiences of people who are objectified and damaged by the policies of prediction and calculation. As examples he makes reference to the anti-austerity ‘indignados' of Spain and, with greater enthusiasm, to the political movements and governments of South America, especially those led by Chavez and Lula. These movements, he claims, represent people whose suffering is directly caused by globalisation yet whose experiences are never heard by the technocratic elite. There is no need here, he argues, for fanciful or detailed utopias of a socialist future. Referencing Walter Benjamin, he argues that what motivates any ‘revolutionary' politics today is not an epistemology guaranteeing a particular socialist programme but, more concretely, the desperate urge to be rid of dismal and degrading inequalities in the present. A radical hermeneutic commitment will find its praxis there, he suggests, in the urgent, lived experiences of struggle and resistance to contemporary social and economic conditions. Elsewhere he acknowledges the inspiration of Marx and a vision of ‘communism’ not as the unavoidable consequence of structural determination but as a vision of commonality in suffering. Reflecting positively on the appointment of Pope Francis, Vattimo at one point identifies the 'global class struggle’ of corporations-versus-impoverished subjects (268) as a backdrop to the 'spectral communism’ that currently haunts the global powers of capital.

Vattimo’s reference to the struggles of the global South appear to frame his philosophical insights from the perspective of material experiences of interpretive conflict, collective commitment and cultural-political resistance. In this, he avoids the Western-centric obsession with sustaining liberal democracies and idealising their cultural foundations. He makes insightful critical remarks on Martha Nussbaum’s writing on 'political emotions', highlighting the tendency of philosophers to seek out heart-warming and consensual values that might reinvigorate capitalist democracies with a gloss of mutual respect and validation. Indignation, he retorts, is a perfectly appropriate response to the horrors of 'disaster capitalism' and we

should not be tempted to regard the promotion of democratic sentiments, or religious moralism, as a means to refuse the discomfiting frictions of politics.

Yet Vattimo's references to Latin American struggles and to Chavismo in particular seem rather dated and neglect to acknowledge the economic and political disaster that Venezuela's left-wing government has since bequeathed. There is some recognition that populism may lead to tyrannical charismatic leaders but it is dismissed rather than explored. More importantly, the riskiness of hermeneutic politics is not tackled as a genuine philosophical dilemma. In affirming the connection of emancipation to the critique of metaphysics, Vattimo does not acknowledge the possibility of idealising suffering and committing uncritically to insurgent forms of politics that exceed and even threaten the openness he endorses. The emergence of conservative national-populist projects across Europe and in the US, and the rise of left-authoritarianism in Latin America in recent years, suggest the weakening of epistemological foundations rarely leads (or leads permanently) to the affirmation of left-wing values of diversity and conciliation. The communities of suffering generated by globalisation are — as President Trump or Brexit remind us — likely to bring reactionary, nativist and racist politics that assert the priority of one group over others. We do not need to agree with the interpretations of national-populists to recognise that they respond to similar experiences of exclusion and degradation as those identified by Vattimo, even if their perception of its causes and resolution is quite different to his. Solidarity and despair are not left-wing sentiments alone.

The problem becomes increasingly evident as Vattimo explores his own politics in more detail. His essay on 'anti-zionism' recounts his (and many others) journey from an early anti-fascist position supportive of Israel in light of the Holocaust experience to one of heightened criticism and horror at Israel's treatment of Palestinians. Gradually, he says, 'we opened our eyes […] to the colonialist and nationalist (even racist) sin that remains like an original sin upon the foundation of the State of Israel' (178). He accepts his change of attitude 'was a complex process' and a not a simple revelation. Nonetheless, Vattimo casually drifts into territory on which he reveals a disappointing absence of critical self-reflection. Claims that Israel is essentially a 'colonialist' and 'racist' project, a tool of American imperialism, a state that deploys charges of anti-semitism simply to obscure its own conservative interests, that the 'destruction of Israel' oft threatened by Iran or Hamas is less a practical policy than a benign opportunity for democratic reinvention — these are unexamined assertions,

commonly accepted by the anti-imperialist left, whose cumulative effect is to belittle threats to Israel's citizens and to delegitimise its state as such, rather than the actions of its government (a distinction that Vattimo openly disavows in any case).

Unfortunately, the effect of such characterisations has not been to promote the 'democratic anti-zionism' to which Vattimo aspires but, rather, to shore up the demonisation of Israel as a peculiarly malign state deserving only of boycotts, denunciation and international isolation. Moreover, Jews everywhere are regularly made the target of hostility and violence for the actions of Israel, even when they neither live there nor support its government. Anti-zionism so easily morphs into anti-Semitism because delegitimising the Israeli state — effectively refusing a homeland to Jews — in order to acknowledge Palestinian suffering, re-presents Jewishness itself as the underlying cause of international disorder. What state, we may ask, is not founded upon terrible injustices? Do we refuse legitimacy to the US (a state founded on slavery, no less)? Singling out Israel as the centre to all (racist, colonialist, imperialist) global injustices manifests an ideological fixation on the part of the radical left that has now calcified into an unexamined 'truth'. Doubtless this is not Vattimo's aim. But his eagerness to commit to simplistic moral postures to express his outrage at Israel offers less a recipe for metaphysical weakening and more an ideological hardening the evades responsibility for its consequences. If we are (rightfully, in my view) to contest Israel's treatment of Palestinians and its relations to its neighbouring territories, we need to step away from the crude affirmation of moral righteousness and thoughtless identification with victims.

The issue here is not that we must rediscover some universal rational principle to enable common agreement on the nature and causes of social division and injustice. But we might be aware that the temptation to treat suffering (our own or that of others) as direct evidence of unacknowledged truths of existence risks the narrowing of interpretive horizons as well as their expansion. How we respond to suffering remains a hermeneutical challenge that cannot be wished away merely by discovering anew our political commitments. International conflicts, the breakdown of democratic cultures, the rise of intolerant and divisive politics can provoke us to do more than affirm our cherished ideals; we need to ask whether and how these commitments may make us complicit with the suffering we bemoan. A radical hermeneutics, for example, might look to its own resources to reflect on how received interpretations, traditions and repertoires of thinking, and vocabularies and languages themselves mobilise prejudices that demand interrogation rather than celebration. Vattimo's

non-dogmatic ‘communism' — which at times folds into a non-violent ‘anarchism’ (274) — are vague starting points for a politics founded on the critique of metaphysics. They align to an inspiring political rebelliousness but they do not in themselves transform resistance to dogma into a language that is affirmative and that may clarify the complex and contradictory demands for emancipation.

A hermeneutical attitude could be more productively focussed on how to put so many different struggles into better, critical dialogue. The rhetorics of righteous affirmation and condemnation too easily lend themselves to the uncritical adoption of positions and slogans; and, eventually, to the simplistic acclamation of leaders. Radical politics, like Heidegger’s ontology, tells us that political engagement is, fundamentally, affective rather than rational. It may even, as Vattimo suggests, demand a form of ‘religious' reflection on what ‘calls' us to attend to our Being. But that should not mean we sentimentalise emancipation or make the critique of metaphysics an aesthetic experience that romanticises the breach with foundational projects. We are bound to such projects even as we find ourselves separating from them: globalisation, for instance, has opened up cultural and technological opportunities we would not wish to renounce as well as brought the constrictions of neoliberal economics. Hermeneutics, John Caputo has written, is ‘an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life’ (Caputo, 1987: 1). To acknowledge our beliefs and values — political, economic, moral — as interpretive choices means to make them available for interrogation, to question the place from which they arise and to ask how we negotiate our positions in the world through them. Heidegger failed miserably to do this, despite his own unparalleled recasting of hermeneutics. Vattimo wants to make clear with his hermeneutics that 'other worlds are possible’. We should not shy away from the interpretive difficulties and the political risks this undoubtedly raises.

Reference:

Caputo, John. 1987. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*. Indiana University Press.