

The Meaning of Heresy for Today

On Theo-Political Resistance from Spinoza to Prince

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By the decree of the angels, and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of all the Holy Congregation, in front of these holy Scrolls with the six-hundred-and-thirteen precepts which are written therein, with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho, with the curse with which Elisha cursed the boys, and with all the curses which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down, and cursed be he when he rises up; cursed be he when he goes out, and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him; the anger and wrath of the Lord will rage against this man, and bring upon him all the curses which are written in this book, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven, and the Lord will separate him to his injury from all the tribes of Israel with all the curses of the covenant, which are written in the Book of the Law.

—July 27, 1656

I want to say a small word about this, our newest burden of the unassimilable.

I want to say that Prince is hard to grieve because he is, in an only barely not literal sense, divine.

I want to say that the categories that most attend him, and that the light of his person illuminates, are not those made by the hands of men.

I want to say that for nearly 40 years Prince has served as perhaps our greatest conceptualist of *religion*, the one most devoted not only to God but to heterodoxy, heresy, blasphemy: to all that, in these latter days of privatized belief and well-bred “spirituality,” lends to the realm of the religious whatever ongoing vitality and incisiveness it has.

I want to say that Prince is the least secular rockstar we have ever known.

—Peter Coviello, “Is There God After Prince?”¹

1. Coviello, “Is There God After Prince?”

In the seventeenth century, when heresy was still a live and dreaded category, the famed European theologian Antoine Arnauld labeled Baruch de Spinoza “the most impious and most dangerous man of the century.” What was it that made Spinoza’s heresy so dangerous to Arnauld? Not only that, but which heresy in particular? And even more, how might we restore or reactivate that sense of danger that Spinoza’s impiety contained?

This set of questions raises another—namely, what are the conditions of possibility for heresy today? Or better, what are the conditions of impossibility? In the age of the heretical imperative, does heresy even have any meaning or impact any longer? The question is not only whether it is possible to be a heretic when it is now accepted as commonplace that we are all and each entitled to believe whatever we want, but what precisely beyond unaccepted or unacceptable beliefs marks the figure of the heretic today? Can one even choose to be a heretic? Or does the element and ubiquity of choice, which in itself defines the heretical imperative, also simultaneously render the figure of the heretic as obsolete?

Put otherwise, how far do we accept the conceit not only that Prince was our greatest conceptualist of religion, but also the contemporary figure of the heretic?

I

First, consider the case of Spinoza: His *Theological-Political Tractatus* from 1670 functions as a political propaedeutic inaugurating an immanent political theology that corresponds to a burgeoning democratic age defined in terms of the modern, liberal order and the sovereign nation state. At the same time, Spinoza was almost the prototypical iconoclast, leaving him an “outcast twice removed”—to the Jewish community a heretic who was excommunicated at age twenty four, and to the Christians, still an “atheist Jew” regarded by his contemporaries as “the most impious and most dangerous man of the century.”² The *Tractatus*, in particular, was regarded by his contemporaries as “subversive,” “blasphemous,” and “diabolical,” but since has been called “pioneering” and a “neglected masterpiece.” It is credited not only for beginning the tradition of higher criticism of the Bible but also for laying out the frame for the modern secular state.

Concerning the former, the religion scholar Ivan Strenski credits Spinoza for his thoroughgoing naturalistic critique of the Bible, claiming Spinoza as the forerunner to the scientific study of religion in general. On one level, Spinoza’s efforts at constructing a “religiously *neutral* approach to biblical interpretation for the purposes of overcoming religious conflict” was no different from deists

2. A charge made by the theologian Antoine Arnauld. See Nadler, *Spinoza*, 337.

such as Jean Bodin and Lord Herbert of Cherbury who came before him.³ But while the bulk of the *Tractatus* is more concerned with religious interpretation than political analysis, its primary intent and what distinguishes Spinoza from other biblical critics from this period, as Spinoza makes clear in the preface, is his passionate and unequivocal defense of the liberal freedoms a modern democratic society affords its citizens as persons of free conscience:

Now since we have the rare good fortune to live in a commonwealth where freedom of judgment is fully granted to the individual citizen and he may worship God as he pleases, and where nothing is esteemed dearer and more precious than freedom, I think I am undertaking no ungrateful or unprofitable task in demonstrating that not only can this freedom be granted without endangering piety and the peace of the commonwealth, but also the peace of the commonwealth and piety depend on this freedom.⁴

Freedom of conscience, which Spinoza sees is a prerequisite for a free society, is not only good for the state, but good for religion as well. For superstition is incompatible with a free society.

The task of his religious analysis, therefore (which in many ways was anti-theological or at least secular in its theological orientation), is to deliver humankind from its ill-founded superstitions and to expose the mystery of despotism to the light of reason. In this way, he divests the sovereign of divine authorization and makes the case for a popular sovereignty wherein authority "is vested in all the citizens, and laws are sanctioned by common consent."⁵ As one scholar puts it, "[Spinoza's] fundamental aim is to replace the reigning theocratic conception of the state with one founded on secular principles."⁶ It is for this reason that those such as Jonathan Israel most prominently praise Spinoza as the most philosophical force of secular modernity and the embodiment of the radical enlightenment. As Israel writes in *Enlightenment Contested*, Spinoza is the intellectual progenitor of "the only kind of philosophy which could (and can) coherently integrate and hold together such a far-reaching value condominium in the social, moral, and political spheres, as well as in 'philosophy.'"⁷ And as one other scholar puts it, "It is Spinoza and Spinozism which promotes the adoption of secular reason and government, universal toleration and shared equity among all men, personal liberty, freedom of expression, and democratic republicanism." And by this account, Spinoza is the quintessential Enlightenment man of reason.

So whence the danger and why the charge of impiety? While his philosophical naturalism rightly is seen to undermine theological supernaturalism, "There

3. Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 50.

4. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 3.

5. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 64.

6. Stewart, *The Courtier and the Heretic*, 101.

7. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 867.

is something more, and more disturbing, in his work” according to Roberto Esposito, from his book, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*.⁸ As Esposito argues, the thing that is more disturbing than Spinoza’s fairly standard Enlightenment critique of religion “concerns the theoretical horizon to which he takes his attack with an impact force never experienced before”⁹—namely, *Spinoza might be condemned because of his religious skepticism, but he is dangerous because of his lack of a notion of a person*—his fundamental rejection of a philosophy of subjectivity—the very notion upon which not only is the machine of political theology predicated according to Esposito, but upon which it draws its legitimacy and fuel. With Spinoza, the linkage between the divine will and the sovereign will is severed just as the place of thought is displaced, dislocated:

Nothing like a personal consciousness as a place of self-identification or imputation is recognizable in what Spinoza calls thought. Rather, thought can be ascribed to the organization of individual minds in a collective structure arising from their interaction—a sort of polyvalent mode, or multiple competence, from which the modes of the substance draw from the elements already acquired by the social brain, continually adding new ones to it.¹⁰

This makes the quintessential Enlightenment man of reason a modern heretic of the first order, for he effectively denies the foundation upon which all modern thought rests. Thought does not take place upon a stable, secure and certain foundation. Rather, thought is dislocated, taking place “out of place . . . because, like a whirlwind, it flows through the entire universe, without ever getting stuck in an individual form.”¹¹

In this way, for Esposito, Spinoza joins the ranks of Averroes before him, and Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze after him, as philosophers of the impersonal, and thus, subjects of and subjected to the “full frontal attack” from the metaphysical tradition. It is these philosophers of the impersonal who insist on “the exteriority of thought with respect to the individual subject.”¹² It is they who say “that a human being is not a subject but an occasion or vehicle for thought,” who conceive of thought as an ability rather than as an exclusionary people, who are not proprietary, who insist that thought belongs to no one, but rather to all people, and finally who “see intelligence not as a property of the few, to the detriment of others, but as a resource for all, through which once can pass without appropriating it for oneself.”¹³

8. Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, 159.

9. Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, 159.

10. Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, 163.

11. Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, 176.

12. Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, 10.

13. Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, 12.

What we might say, therefore, with regard to Spinoza's heresy is that it was not his secularity that was heretical, nor his naturalism. To be sure, his beliefs—specifically, his denial of the immortality of the soul, his rejection of the notion of a providential God, and his claim that the Law was neither literally given by God nor any longer binding on Jews—were considered radical and unacceptable by his orthodox Jewish community. And so, as Steven Nadler asks, "Can there be any mystery as to why one of history's boldest and most radical thinkers was sanctioned by an orthodox Jewish community?"¹⁴ At the same time, he would become a model for biblical criticism just as much as he is now regarded as one of the theoretical architects of the modern, liberal state as he divested the secular nation state of its theological authorization and made the case for the democratic principle of popular sovereignty.

Or better, both his secularity and his naturalism were appropriately deemed heretical vis-à-vis traditional, orthodox belief, *but this does not quite explain why his impiety was thought to be so dangerous*. And so, it is perhaps best to separate Spinoza's heresy from his danger. That is to say, *it was not his religious heresy that ultimately proved to be the danger*. This is the point about him being an "outcast twice removed," expelled and excommunicated from the People of Israel by the Talmud Torah Congregation of Amsterdam, though remarkably, not only does he never repent or submit, but he also never converts. As others have noted, he lived and died perhaps as the first fully secular individual in modern Europe, and as such, did not violate, but actualized, a norm—namely, the modern, liberal, secular norm that treats religion as an individual matter of private conscience. But by his philosophy of the impersonal, he was deemed a danger, because his thinking seemed to violate, discredit, or dismantle the very edifice upon which said norm was supposedly built. His case proves interesting, therefore, because of an entire series of displacements: (1) the displacement of thought by virtue of the philosophy of the impersonal; (2) the displacement of the heretical from the religious; and, (3) the displacement of danger from the heretical.

If Spinoza was in fact the most dangerous and impious man of the century, it was only because the secularization of the modern West displaces and defangs the disciplinary category of heresy as a means of control. It would seem that heresy has lost its meaning and its force. Meanwhile, the possibility for impious and dangerous thought still abounds.

II

Second, the "heretical imperative": this is a phrase coined by the sociologist of religion Peter Berger to describe the generalized condition of religious belief in

14. Nadler, *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, 225.

contemporary Western society. Berger was once a proponent of the secularization thesis, the notion that the more modern we become, the less religious we would become. He has since talked in terms of the “deseccularization of the world,” warning that those who neglect the religious dimension of life in their social and political analysis do so at their own peril. His book *The Heretical Imperative* was a relatively early work wherein he first engaged in the effort to develop an alternative to the secularization thesis, opting for what he termed the “pluralization thesis” instead. Anticipating the post-secular critique of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmoud, and others, Berger acknowledges that the secularization thesis was essentially a parochial theory that had adopted a modern, Western norm of religiosity. To be sure, the post-Reformation history of Western modernity has altered the contours of religious belief and practice. But it is religious pluralism more than secularity that best describes our contemporary situation. What Western modernity represents, or what makes the modern world so radically new and different, is not unbelief, but the ubiquity of choices—choice as the “taken-for-granted fabric of modern life.”¹⁵ As Berger sees it, the range and ease of choices within the modern world would represent the “realm of mythological fantasy” for most of premodern society—“choices of occupation, of place of residence, of marriage, of the number of one’s children, in the manner of passing one’s leisure time, in the acquisition of material goods. . . . But there are other choices too, choices that deeply touch the inner world of individuals—choices of what is now commonly called ‘life-style,’ moral and ideological choices, and, last but not least, religious choices.”¹⁶

What is more, this fact of modern consciousness “has a powerfully relativizing effect on all worldviews.” Berger calls this the “vertigo of relativity induced by modernization,” and thus identifies Western modernity as “a great relativizing cauldron.”¹⁷ What was once regarded as fate is now deemed as the result of choice. What was once accepted as divine providence is now critiqued as a function of ideology. The world is not as it is because it must be, but could always be otherwise. As pluralization leads to relativization, this impacts our plausibility structures—or better, institutions and communities’ ability to provide the requisite social confirmation for our respective beliefs about reality. “Quite simply,” Berger argues, “the modern individual must engage in more deliberate thinking—*not* because he is more intelligent, *not* because he is on some sort of higher level of consciousness, *but* because his social situation forces him to this.”¹⁸ There is a felt, internalized sense of the necessity to choose not only individual beliefs, but even more, the very terms of plausibility that determine the very logic of assent.

15. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 2.

16. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 2–3.

17. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 9.

18. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 18.

Berger is clear about the existential or psychological ramifications of this transformation. In a section entitled “A Very Nervous Prometheus,” he acknowledges how the ubiquity of choice is experienced both as a great source of liberation and as a cause for “anxiety, alienation, even terror.”¹⁹ We might think here of what Jean-Paul Sartre calls the “burden of freedom”—insofar as existence precedes essence, it is we who shoulder the entire burden of our becoming. The world, for good or ill, is the world of our own making. And it is why for Sartre that existentialism must necessarily be atheistic, for in contrast to Heidegger, there is no god to save us.

Concerning the heretical imperative specifically, the dynamic between pluralization, relativization, and the crisis of plausibility that ensues once the unified social support for religious beliefs and practices has broken down, equals a generalized transition from religious certainty to religious doubt. Literally speaking, choice makes heretics of us all. But the key point from Berger’s argument is that once heresy becomes the “root phenomenon” or “general condition” of modernity, it loses its meaning. “For this notion of heresy to have any meaning at all,” Berger writes, “there was presupposed the authority of religious tradition. Only with regard to such an authority could one take an heretical attitude.”²⁰ In sum, if heresy was a permanent, though always remote, possibility within premodern societies, the modern world makes it a necessity in that “modernity creates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative.”²¹ And so, rather than inquiring into the conditions of possibility for heresy today, we should speak instead in terms of the *conditions of impossibility*. To go back to the point made with regard to Spinoza, once the danger has been dislocated from the heresy, the figure of the heretic loses all meaning and force.

Or, to invoke another theoretical frame of reference, Catherine Malabou has written extensively about the concept of plasticity. First noted in her study of Hegel conducted under the tutelage of Jacques Derrida, she also has explored the concept within the work of Heidegger, Freud, and Kant, writing landmark works that provide new and different readings of these seminal figures that attend primarily to how change, mutability, and metamorphosis lie at the root of difference, are the source of difference, and, thus, how a metabolic ontology displaces the ontological difference and how the epoch of plasticity has displaced the epoch of writing. In what is perhaps her most well-known work, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, she suggests a radical freedom to the human condition that is almost inconceivable—the idea that we are free not only to think thoughts or to perform actions, but literally to make or remake ourselves, to rewire our brains. For Malabou, the dissolving of the distinction between mind and brain does not lead to a moral (pre)determinism as if biology is destiny; on

19. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 20.

20. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 25.

21. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 25 (italics in the original.)

the contrary, it is a new materialism that radicalizes by extending the notion of freedom from mind to body, from being thought of as an ideational aspect of culture to being absolutely essential to a proper understanding of nature itself.

The “genius” of plasticity, Malabou argues, is in how it resists. The genius here refers to the dual aspect of plasticity—that is, the concept of plasticity means not just the capacity to receive form or to be acted upon, but also, the capacity to give form or to resist. She argues that our current neuronal ideology gets it only half right. It is correct that the brain is not a fixed entity, and that it retains this permanent capacity to open up new neuronal pathways, to adjust to certain traumas, and to actualize almost an infinitude of possibilities. The brain demonstrates a remarkable resiliency and flexibility, adjusting and responding to almost any environment. Likewise the worker in a post-industrial economy—the worker is nomadic. To thrive in today’s global economy, the worker must be willing and able to adjust to new market demands, adjust to the rapid pace of change, learn and relearn new skills and capacities. As such, it is a biopolitics of extreme flexibility that renders the subject almost entirely pliant, a blob of clay that can be molded and remolded at the market’s whims.

But, this is only one half of plasticity. Malabou draws a hard line differentiating between flexibility and adaptability. What differentiates them is the latter retains its resistance. Our current neuronal ideology blinds us to the possibility of resistance because such agency runs counter to the demands of a global workforce. We see in the brain only what we want to see. Or more precisely, the brain lacks self-awareness because of the biopolitical restraints imposed upon it by virtue of certain economic realities. This is the biopolitical culture of late capitalism as described by Fredric Jameson. If the plasticity of the brain is misconstrued only as a flexibility, then this naturalizes and thus justifies all forms of the dislocation and exploitation of labor. Consider here the work of those such as Gramsci and Berardi, who have chronicled the particular post-industrial form that contemporary exploitation takes through its captivity of mental labor. Malabou goes one step further: this captivity must be understood to be not only ideological, but material—because, after all, the mind is nothing other than the brain.

Applied to Berger’s notion of the heretical imperative wherein the ubiquity of choice that defines the general condition of modernity renders heresy meaningless, what we might learn from Malabou is that we must find and restore the element of resistance to the heretical. Likewise the danger. We must ask what modes of action, identity formation, material practices, and habits of thought might distinguish the heretic today. With Spinoza, we saw how the danger was dislodged from the heretical, or better, how the most dangerous heresy was dislodged from the religious. By virtue of the philosophy of the impersonal, we might say that it is not the case of Spinoza as an individual that is most interesting and important, but rather the spectral figure of the anonymous sovereign that Spinoza invokes: he dislodges thought from the subject. We might even

go further to say that he dislodges freedom from choice. It is not the self who chooses to become a heretic, but the external authority that retains the prerogative to decide. Or better, heresy is something that is *said of you, not claimed by you*. And because the decision is not the heretic's to decide, the figure of the heretic provides a unique insight into not only the nature of choice, but also the possibility for resistance and the realization of freedom. Insofar as the ubiquity of choice is the general condition of modernity and the choices made by an individual are thought to constitute his or her selfhood, the heretical imperative renders heresy a practical impossibility. But when not only thought, but choice, is dislodged from the individual subject, the possibility of resistance is restored even while displaced, and with it, the danger to the figure of the heretic.

What I mean by this is that, when it comes to the condition of possibility for heresy today, we must shift the question from who to where—it is not who is a heretic, but where does heresy happen, and what does the happening of heresy make of the subject who resists?

III

Third, is it true that Prince provides for us one of the most compelling figures of the heretic today? So argued Peter Coviello in a beautifully written eulogy for Prince in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* entitled "Is There God After Prince?" The suggestion is that Prince was heretical because he was "the least secular rockstar we have ever known." This doesn't make Prince "religious" in the traditional sense of the term. In this way, I much prefer Coviello's reading to that of someone like Maggie Gallagher from the *National Review*, who renders Prince as one of the "secret Christians among us," enlisting him in the hint of a reprieve of Nixon's "silent majority." For Coviello, by contrast, it was precisely Prince's lewdness, filthiness, and eroticism that made him positively otherworldly—"the otherworldliness of someone very much of this world." More specifically, it was Prince's transitivity with regard to race, gender, and sex, his "feminized masculinity" à la David Bowie, but also his "queer blackness" that made him stand out. The world's categories did not have a hold on him. And so it is that Coviello proclaims:

This, friends, is the otherworldliness—let's just say it: the *divinity*—of Prince. Without contempt, without pity, with louche bemusement and flirty solicitousness, he stands apart from the creaky organizing edifices, the aspirational little taxonomies, of the merely human. They address him, but they do not adhere to him. He speaks in, and as, something otherwise, but also, deliciously, near.²²

While I appreciate Coviello's tribute and accept his presentation of a sort of unassimilable and confounding religiosity, I am not prepared to so quickly

22. Coviello, "Is There God after Prince?"

conflate the heterodoxical and blasphemous with the heretical, as both come before as necessary but insufficient ingredients to the category of the heretical. Coviello does well to get us to reconsider the meaning of religion today. *But in so doing, he simultaneously strips Prince of his heretical credentials.* To be a pioneer is not necessarily to be a heretic. Transgression does not automatically qualify as heresy, or at least without the risk of the further loss of meaning, we must not conflate transgression with heresy. To be unbound is testimony to the condition of impossibility for heresy today. And still, what has become of the danger? Is it still possible for heresy to be an act of resistance at all? Or are we content to allow it to circulate instead as the honorific title it seems to have become?

Consider the case of Pier Paolo Pasolini instead: Of Pasolini, Ben Lawton has written, "If Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Camille Paglia, Madonna, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Michael Moore, and Noam Chomsky were rolled up into a single person, one might begin to get some idea of the impact Pasolini had on Italian society."²³ At his most basic, in his various personas as revolutionary ideologue, artist, filmmaker, public intellectual, and critic, Pasolini was a *scittore scomodo*, meaning an "uncomfortable writer," or more specifically, one who makes others feel awkward and uncomfortable. For him always the measure of art's validity was only in its revolutionary capacity—not just pacing, pioneering, or accelerating the changes to societal norms, but actively resisting, breaking with form, defying expectations, engendering rejection, disgust, and reprimand. He defined the artistic process as sadomasochistic, and as Lawton chronicles, he paid the price: arrested and tried thirty-three times for crimes ranging from armed robbery to contempt for the state religion, and eventually brutally murdered in what appeared to be a mafia-style revenge killing. He was a pessimist through and through who by the end of his life had become so thoroughly disillusioned with the triumph of global capitalism and the prospect of revolution that he wrote a public repudiation of his work. What becomes of an artist whose principal commitment is to revolution when he no longer believes in society's capacity for revolution? Such was the dilemma faced by Pasolini. And by his characteristic sincerity and felt sense of necessity, his repudiation provides a contemporary figure of heresy that resonates as deeply as it disturbs.

The details of his repudiation are as follows: he specifically repudiates his "trilogy of life" films, an experimental series of films made late in his life that were meant to contain a "hidden, indirect, [and] implicit" ideology.²⁴ The trilogy was comprised of *The Decameron* (1971), *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and *A Thousand and One Nights* (1974). These films were meant to celebrate the creative process in itself, but also be expressive of a clear point of view. By the time of

23. In Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, vii–viii.

24. Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, vi.

these late works, Pasolini had come to the conclusion that “consumer capitalism was worse than fascism” because of the ways by which it “coopts its victims” and “transforms them into willing participants in their own exploitation.”²⁵ In his advice to the young from 1968, for instance, he worries about their inability to “look at the bourgeoisie objectively, from the outside:”

We, young intellectuals of twenty or thirty years ago (and through privilege of class, students), could be anti-bourgeois also outside the bourgeoisie, through the optics offered to us from the other social classes (revolutionary or rebellious as they might be).

. . . As a consequence, we also made of the traumatic hatred for the bourgeoisie a correct perspective in which to integrate our action in a non-escapist future . . .

For a young person of today things are different: for him it is much more difficult to look at the bourgeoisie objectively through the eyes of another social class. Because the bourgeoisie is triumphing, it is transforming both the workers and the ex-colonial peasants into bourgeois. In short, through neocapitalism the bourgeoisie is becoming the human condition. Those who are born into this entropy cannot in any way, metaphysically, be outside of it.²⁶

So how to resist this hegemony? Pasolini came to believe that the best way to resist was through an attack on family values vis-à-vis heterosexuality and procreation. But his cinematic violation of sexual norms were taken by many as mere pornography. As a rejoinder to his critics’ confusion, his final film radically changed course: *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, based on the work of Marquis de Sade. In contrast to the “trilogy of life” series, in *Salò* Pasolini’s hidden ideology was made more explicit. In the words of Lawton, the “sexual activities [were] depicted in a manner which [was] so grotesque, so dehumanizing, so brutalizing that they simply [could not] become a consumer product.”²⁷ Gone was the belief that homosexuality might represent humanity’s salvation. Gone was the characteristic endearing depiction of the sub proletariat, of the coming revolution. Everything in total now comes under the harshest of gazes and the sharpest of attacks. With the near total triumph of capital and bourgeois culture, Pasolini’s hatred became complete, a hatred of the bourgeoisie that Lawton writes “was not only ‘pathological’ but sterile,” a “pointless gesture” or a “desperate but quixotic wish” that leads to little besides Pasolini’s own “personal trauma.”²⁸

To resist, in the words of Pasolini, was to “live a tragedy.” And the more he saw, and the more he observed, he noted that those who lived it with moral condemnation, and without assimilation or apology, also died of it. To live as a

25. Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, x.

26. Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 155–56.

27. Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, xii.

28. Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, xxxv.

nonconformist in an age he defined as "the assimilation of bourgeois history to human history" is to suffer rejection, condemnation, disgust, and death.

It is only at this point, I want to argue, that Pasolini, the acclaimed revolutionary artist and intellectual, becomes a heretic. Partly because he is now utterly alone. But even more, having made a career by pushing boundaries with a revolutionary aesthetic all his own, his resistance is now absolutized by rebounding upon himself. He becomes a heretic in the sense that he himself becomes a danger to himself by occupying a position of total resistance to society. I do not mean to say that Pasolini got his comeuppance. I take no glee or comfort in this final act of repudiation. But when it comes to what he terms a "heretical empiricism," there is no finer example than the model he shows.

His repudiation begins by distinguishing between the before and after of an action or creation, claiming a sincerity and necessity to both. *Before* the act of creation, he writes, one acts without fear, knowing full well the potential for being misunderstood or coopted. *After* the act of creation, one must find the courage to recognize how one's intentions have been subjugated, manipulated, absorbed, twisted, distorted, or assimilated. The importance of this distinction between the before and the after is that it allows Pasolini to *repudiate without repenting* for his creation. He affirms the "sincerity and necessity" that motivated the works and details their "historical and ideological justifications." But at the same time, where he was once inspired, he became disgusted. All has become rubbish to him. "The collapse of the present," he writes in the repudiation, "implies the collapse of the past. Life is a pile of insignificant and ironic ruins."²⁹ The present folds into the past, implicating the world in a kind of trance of consumerism masquerading as freedom and a myth of progress obscuring a much more sinister and desolate truth:

My critics . . . seem to think that Italian society has unquestionably improved, that is, that it has become more democratic, more tolerant, more modern, etc. They do not notice the avalanche of crimes that submerges Italy. . . . They do not notice that there is no break between those who are technically criminal and those who are not; and that the model of insolence, inhumanity, ruthlessness is identical for the entire mass of young people. They do not notice that in Italy there actually is a curfew, that the night is as deserted and sinister as it was in the darkest centuries of the past; but they do not notice this, they stay home (perhaps to gratify their consciences with modernity aided by television).³⁰

To be a heretic today, in a world where the heretical imperative comes easy and without consequence, means to enter into this repudiation complete. Picking up where Pasolini leaves off, Wendy Brown has described neoliberal-

29. Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, xviii–xix.

30. Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, xii–xiii.

ism's stealth revolution that has effectively remade the soul and remade the state. Neoliberalism has become the world's "global truth" whose signs and effects are "globally ubiquitous" leading to intensified inequality, crass or unethical commercialization, the floodgates of money pouring into electoral politics allowing undue and unequal political influence for the moneyed elite, and increased economic volatility. Roundly bemoaned, but rarely traced to their source, these are the effects of the neoliberal revolution that has rendered us nearly incapable to resist. Or better, this is a situation of *political incapacity*, or these are the political conditions of impossibility, an internalization of a norm of powerlessness whereby the democratic semblance of people's rule is incapacitated by the wholesale reconstitution of *homo politicus* as *homo oeconomicus*.

With such a monopoly on truth—indeed, on the very rationalization of truth and value—the reign of capital is every bit as pervasive as the most totalizing state forms and most fundamentalist of religious ideologies. Its oppression is hidden by the ubiquity of choice masquerading as freedom. In this context, heresy does not happen simply by being heterodoxical. On the contrary, by exercising one's freedom of choice one confirms, rather, challenges the norm. The purchase on the literal renders us nearly a universal community on the vanguard—rebels without cause and without cost. Beyond the literal, we might state the obvious: to be a heretic means to suffer rejection, expulsion and damnation. To be a heretic today is to be a witness to the suffering and alienation that befalls those who dare to resist. To be a heretic today is to be without choice. Heresy today is the supreme example of futility. And it is precisely such waste, expenditure, and nonproductivity that we most need.

Failure is our only option. Even more, it is our only hope.

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