PARRHESIA NUMBER 20 • 2014 • 124-8

FINDING *COMMON GROUND* WITH JEREMY GILBERT: JEREMY GILBERT, *COMMON GROUND: DEMOCRACY AND COLLECTIVITY IN AN AGE OF INDIVIDUALISM* (PLUTO PRESS, 2014)

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Philosophical narratives largely operate through a central problematic, which is first defined, then resolved. In Gilbert's *Common Ground*, the problematic is as philosophically and politically central as any: the 'crisis' in neo-liberal democracy and global ecological catastrophe - and how the former impedes any effective response to the latter. In two hundred pages, Gilbert seeks not so much to redefine or revolutionise the conceptual tools we already have to approach this problematic so much as to 'sort' these tools according to different modalities, logics or applications. Gilbert, this is to say, seeks not so much to create new concepts (the putative task of any Deleuzian philosophy) as arrange them.

HOW DOES *COMMON GROUND* WORK?

In *Postmodernity and the Crisis of Democracy* (the first chapter of the book) Gilbert discusses the "great social liberalisation of the late twentieth century" (20), and how this shift has helped transform everyday life "into an exhilarating but bewildering panoply of choices" (20). Throughout *Common Ground*, it is fair to say that Gilbert presents us with such a 'panoply of choices'. Scattered through each paragraph, each section, each paragraph, Gilbert takes us through his philosophical library: Arendt, Bennett, Borch-Jacobsen, Connolly, Crouch, Deleuze & Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, Freud, Gramsci, Hardt & Negri, Harvey, Hobbes, Laclau & Mouffe, Lazzareto, Levinas, Nancy, Simondon, Spinoza, Stiegler—and so on. In order to make this panoply do some conceptual work, Gilbert extracts the central problem I hinted at above: "the problem of how to overcome these multiple tendencies towards disaggregation and individualisation in order to enable collective decisions to be taken and to be rendered potent and effective" (27).

In order to 'overcome' these tendencies, then, Gilbert seeks to first locate them philosophically. This is how *Common Ground* works, this is how Gilbert 'sorts' conceptual tools according to different modalities and logics: through tracing, tracking and dismissing varieties of individualism and through identifying and recog-

nising varieties of a more complex social ontology. Gilbert seeks to, precisely, enlighten us as to the *common ground* amongst these diverse range of thinkers on the dismissal of individualism and the tendency towards non-individualist (but also non-communitarian) social ontologies. This aim itself raises a plethora of issues, but I will now turn more closely to Gilbert's arguments themselves.

TRACING INDIVIDUALISM & THE 'LEVIATHAN LOGIC'

For Gilbert, individualism is both a political and philosophical problem. It is a political problem because of its tendency to weaken democratic institutions and the possibilities for collective decision-making. It is a philosophical problem because it is, for Gilbert, *stupid* and *logically incoherent* (33). His critique of individualism is not (nor is it offered as) a novel one. The individual is defined as that basic unit of human experience, and our individuality as the source of our capacity to act in the world. The individual is that which is quite literally indivisible, a unique and independent atom that autonomously *enters* into social relations (and so, 'freedom' for an individual will consist in protecting it from those social relations it does not autonomously enter into). So put, Gilbert places himself in a tradition that accords primary recognition to the necessarily social nature of all human existence; "human capacity to act alone in the world is incredibly limited" (34). Whatever individuality is, this is to say, it is an effect of a primary sociality.

The philosophical zero-point of individualism (specifically, competitive individualism) is the zero-point of not just Thomas Hobbes, but of the great majority of liberal thought. Gilbert insightfully claims that the liberal tradition can be understood as a continuous attempt at disinvesting liberalism from Hobbes's authoritarian implications, but while retaining this individualist zero-point (37). Gilbert extracts what he terms a 'Leviathan Logic' from Hobbes, which he sees as having four central features (49-52; 69-70):

1. Ontological individualism
2. A negative understanding of the social (insofar as social relations are seen as impacting upon the 'freedom' of the individual).
3. Verticalism ('collectives' can only function through an established vertical relationship between individuals and a leader, Hobbes's Leviathan).
4. Meta-Individualism (this vertical relationship constitutes a 'collective subject' which homogenises the members of that collective—eg a nation).[1]

For Gilbert, the liberal tradition and the Leviathan Logic are condemned to think democracy improperly, or more specifically, to elide or subsume 'democracy' and 'liberal democracy'. When ontological individualism is the zero-point of democratic thought, this is to say, we are condemned to the critical tension between 'individual' and 'collective' sovereignty that so many have pointed to (some to valorize the former, some to valorize the latter). Through rejecting ontological individualism as his own zero-point, then, Gilbert seeks to escape this supposed critical tension. How does he seek to achieve this?

'INFINITE RELATIONALITY': HORIZONTALITY, MULTITUDE AND AFFECT

Gilbert's move, after having identified the Leviathan Logic, is clear; he searches instead for a social ontology that resists verticalism and individualism. He finds many resources, taking a reading of Marx (74-88) as 'the most important critic of individualist thought in European history' (77) and dismisses any notion of historical teleology or verticalism in him (as in, say, Gramsci's verticalist notion of the party (87-88)).

His rejection of verticalism, however, is not an embracement of a pure politics of horizontality; rather, Gilbert instead associates himself with a diagnolism (92-93), or more specifically, with Deleuze & Guattari's notion of the rhizome as a social logic that transverses horizontality and verticality. Individuals and collectives—or 'molar assemblages'– are here more perspicuously described as being defined by or constituted through these diagonal relations (107). Gilbert draws usefully on Simondon's notion of (never complete) processes of indi-

viduation (107-111)—or, 'crystallisation' - in order to more fully elucidate this.

Further, Gilbert leans heavily upon a passage from Arendt to introduce his notion of 'infinite relationality' (111-112). The precise meaning of this term is unclear. In fact, it is possible to view most of the second half of *Common Ground* as the search for a definition of this notion. 'Infinite relationality' is noted as a "condition of possibility and the inherently limiting factor of all human agency" (112). From this, it is fair to call 'infinite relationality' Gilbert's attempt to capture at least two of his central positions:

1. That, whatever the individual is, she is *not* indivisible, rather, she is caught in a social web of 'infinite relationality' that conditions her individuality as such.
2. Insofar as individuality is constituted through this web of 'infinite relationality', it is always processual and partial, or rather; individuation within a web of infinite relationality is always ongoing, it is an ontological 'openness' or a 'becoming'.

Given (1) and (2), it is unsurprising that Gilbert also finds succor in Hardt & Negri's account of the multitude as a creative collectivity without meta-individuality (so, a collectivity that isn't subsumed under the Leviathan Logic) and as an 'infinite network of singularities' (98). This also immediately links infinite relationality to Nancy's notion of *being-singular-plural* (115-117), as well as Derrida's democracy-to-come (120).

This web of 'infinite relationality' is not anthropocentric, however, it also incorporates our ontological entanglement with 'nature' and 'technology', broadly speaking. Gilbert discusses favourably thereon the compatibility of 'infinite relationality' with the diverse philosophical approaches of Bennett, Braidotti, Connolly, Lazaretto, Negri and Spinoza.

Then, there is the affective nature of infinite relationality. All modes of social organisation contain an 'affective dynamic'. Neoliberalism, for example, (1) encourages joyous affects and empowerment to be realized in consumption and (2) attempts to circumscribe experiences of sociality that aren't market-based to be experienced as aggressive or as a source of fear and insecurity - such as 'riotous' protests, 'dangerous' raves, and so on (184).

Importantly, then, infinite relationality is, for Gilbert, not just a corrective (or rather, an overhaul) of the Leviathan Logic - it is a *standard*. This is to say that an account of infinite relationality enables the assessment of political projects, strategies, models, etc. It enables at least two questions:

1. To what extent is sociality experienced as empowering and joyous in a given social organisation?
2. To what extent does that given social organisation enable us to experience the infiniteness of our relationality?

Modes of social organisation can be assessed on these grounds. Whilst both neoliberalism and fascism, for example, may foster joyous experiences (in consumption or in the presence of the leader), these modes of social organisation also curtail the experience of relationality—neoliberalism through limiting such experiences to market-relations and fascism through the active exclusion of certain others (usually based on this or that ontic configuration).

Having given this brief exposition of the approach of *Common Ground*, I will now engage in a more critical analysis.

COMMON GROUND'S EXCLUSIONS

Gilbert's arrangement of conceptual tools in *Common Ground* is an attempt to enable the isolation and exclusion of those components of any conceptual instrument that tends towards the Leviathan Logic or towards circumscribing our potential experiences of relationality. It seems fair, and in the spirit of Gilbert's own standard for the assessment of political projects ((1) and (2) above), to assess *Common Ground* itself in the extent to which it enables the enhancement of our experiences of relationality. I am here speaking specifically of conceptual or philosophical relationality that he hints at in his discussion of libraries as sites of the enhancement of creative capacities (201). On three occasions, Gilbert's own project appears to circumscribe the very experiences of relationality he seeks, overall, to enhance or propagate.

> α. Hegel, who appears only sparsely and in short reference, plays little role in *Common Ground*. This itself is, of course, no failure. However, whilst acknowledging the importance of Hegel to any thinking of relationality (117), Gilbert dismisses Hegel in so far as he is said to have supported the Prussian state (77) and in the putative connection between Hegel's 'Absolute Knowing' as expressing a 'finiteness' of relationality (118). For Gilbert, Hegel is useful and important to the extent that he enabled Marx; and it is Marx who is the most 'important critic of individualist thought in European history' (77).
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> β. A second, related, exclusion in *Common Ground* is the ominous absence of Slavoj Žižek. One can't help but notice an implicit dialogue with Žižek when, for example, Gilbert dismisses Hegel and those who are indebted to Lacan (118).[2]
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> γ. Thirdly, there is the absence of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's shadow is explicitly felt in the many discussions of social ontology and relationality throughout, in the extended discussion of tools, instruments, technology and nature (130-134), and in the references to Jean-Luc Nancy.

In α, β and γ there is the implicit and explicit exclusion of a whole range of important philosophical thinking on relationality. One of the great strengths of *Common Ground* is conjoining of aspects of a disparate range of conceptual tools. It is therefore peculiar that Hegel - whose work functioned at least in part as a condition of possibility of Marx's (though the extent to which Marx's Hegelianism is a separate and open question)—is so swiftly rejected. It is likewise peculiar that the thought of Žižek and Heidegger is unconsidered throughout. On these particular aspects, it is unfortunate that *Common Ground* does not even consider potential lateral, diagonal relations (that is, finding *some* common ground)—relations Gilbert praises (92-93)—between his account and these others. At one point, Gilbert notes that one of the purposes of consensus democracy is not the reaching of 'total agreement', but on a common acceptance on the terms of disagreement (178). One can't help but feel that such a common acceptance, or even a 'molecular sympathy' (204) on a common conceptual purpose, is absent in these respects. Here, Gilbert frustrates the conceptual and creative capacity of his own work—and so, limits and circumscribes - the relational nature of *Common Ground*, rather than enhance it.

READING *COMMON GROUND*

Common Ground is a work that is commendable in its aim and breadth. It would serve students well as an introduction to many of the most important philosophical thinkers since the latter half of the twenty-first century, and it does impressively draw strong lines of connection between them. Gilbert's connections, though, *do* come at the cost of some noteworthy exclusions, of which I only suggested three. The task of *Common Ground* is impressively large, and so, it is unsurprisingly that it remains as-yet incomplete.

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NOTES

1. Specifically, he also tracks (3) and (4) Le Bon and Freud, where groups only function through the common adoption of an ego-ideal (57).
2. Relatedly, the only noticeable mention of Badiou is a strong slight: 'It is easy to see […] why others should have retreated into a heroic millenarianism whose 'communism' amounts to nothing more than an existential faith in the miraculous transformatory power of revolutionary 'events'' (15).