“Revolution!” – The Rhetoric of Exclamation

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Excitement and Exclamation!

Revolution! Something is happening – but what? Castro pounds the table. Then silence. He looks up, furrows his brow, and declaims:

> The advantages of socialism are truly tremendous if one wants to take advantage of them. [Pounds on table.] I think that some of these programs that we have been mentioning – interest circles, schools, agromarkets, central markets [*Mercado concentrado*], terminals – are all inconceivable in capitalism. If socialism has all these advantages, then why not take advantage of them? (Castro 1989)

Even with the repeated table pounding, *that’s* not terribly exciting. So whence the excitement and on what is it founded? What is its nature? Is it real, the excitement of wonder, the affect of change, the burning shock of spilt coffee, even the “Argh!” we shriek when someone is punching us – or is it some other kind of thing, perhaps something that uses the furniture of exclamation to infiltrate our awareness by simulating excitement – or by *promising* it? Perhaps excitement here eventually shrinks down to the banality of linguistic categories, even punctuation. The revolutionary utterance characteristically deploys the exclamation mark, and with it, the imperative. “Workers of the world – unite!” is perhaps the best known example, but there are many others, including paradoxical formulations such as the 1968 slogan,”Soyez réalistes – demandez l’impossible!” [Be realistic, demand the impossible] – a request, of course, that one may make, albeit with a

rather limited expectation of success.(1)

In the case of the revolutionary, the exclamation mark indicates a particular cultural metaphysics, whereby the tunes of sacred messianism and culthood are sung in a secular key. Secularity itself invokes – as John Milbank(2) has pointed out – a certain conception of *time*: the revolutionary date-stamps himself with the modern; yet the sacrality of the secular also reminds us – or should – that despite all disavowals of *religio*, the revolutionary cult is to be bonded together not just in common cause (*religare,* to bind together), but also, in secular worship of an idol. This is an important point. The North Korean reaction to Kim Jong Il's demise reveals a overarchingly religious, rather than political, hermeneutic at work. And this is not a recent thing. The French Revolution's self-marketing as atheistic shouldn't put us off. Its putative overthrow of religion involved the formation of the so-called "Culte de la Raison" [Cult of Reason], which had an annual "Fête de la Raison" [Festival of Reason], where a young woman was chosen to lead the procession as the proxy of the Goddess of Reason. While mass was outlawed, Churches were transformed into Temples of Reason; revolutionary martyrs were substituted for Christian martyrs. At one level the French Revolution was explicitly anti-religious – but we don't understand it properly if we fail to see the religious elements in it. In this respect, the revolution is not at all as it seems – it seems to be (in this case) social and political; and many interpreters of these historical moments and movements have been complicit in extending their self-advertising. Yet in fact, if these had effects on the planes of the social and the political, their primary field of operation is rhetorical and figural.

This essay explores the rise of a new rhetoric of modernity, the revolution, as well as the figure who advocates it, the revolutionary. While this rhetoric and this figure are not confined to the political sphere, our essay confines itself to this domain. Perforce the inquiry has a number of stages, and yields the structure of this essay. We begin with establishing that there is such a thing as a rhetoric of modernity, and of revolution. Then we look at its figuration, the self-styled revolutionary, borrowing to be sure from older hagiographic and victimary traditions, but by degrees novel nonetheless after 1789. The figural aspect of the revolutionary points to a scene of activity; its rhetorical dimensions suggest a role in relation to violence (its fervour perhaps, but also, at times, its deferral), and therefore, the final two sections of the essay explore on the one hand the ultimate and yet empty metaphysics of revolutionary content today, and on the other, the relationship of the scene of the revolutionary to Generative Anthropology.

Revolution as Modern Phenomenon

Unlike "religions," revolutions have not always existed, at least in the modern sense of that term.(3) Revolutions are not "natural" to humanity – or, at least what we *think* of as revolutions are not natural to humanity. Of course, if the idea of revolution is taken at the face value of large-scale social or political change – the overturning of a situation – then

revolutions have been taking place since the days of the pharaohs. These clearly are not to be confused with the dimension of revolution we seek to describe. What we seek to explore is the gap between a large revolutionary claim and its reality – the modern revolution, and the modern revolutionary, and the textual forms and formats that define them.

Many feel that revolutions – like nation states – have existed forever. In the modern world, the genesis of revolution lies in its links both to the fact and status of innovation. René Girard has pointed out that the rise of a rhetoric of innovation did not suddenly mean that the people beforehand were somehow deficient, but rather, that there was a theological shift before such that, in many instances, innovation was synonymous with heresy ("Innovation and Repetition" 7). He goes on to cite Thomas Hobbes who, as late as the seventeenth century could remark that there are those "who supposing themselves wiser than others, endeavour to innovate" (7). Girard also cites Montaigne to the same effect (8). The scathing tone in Hobbes' remark, however, shows the philosopher's view of the practice in a forcible way. Girard discusses (and dismisses) challenges to his own view of the late eighteenth century as the moment when the dichotomous valuations of innovation and tradition were inverted, rejecting the idea that the Reformation, for instance, was an attempt at revolution (8). We do not ourselves hold to such a strong view of this period as Girard does (and we are hesitant when he proposes such a strongform epistemic rupture as this), but we do agree with him that by the late eighteenth century, tradition had come to be seen as stale and innovation as an inherent good (8-9). For him indeed, the year 1789, serves as a marker – though he does not himself make this year significant. We obviously *do* see the significance of this date. The French Revolution is a deeply significant date for modernity; it helps us to understand aspects of modernity, its rhetoric, its figures, its paradoxes. The new version of revolution is coeval with the shift Girard describes in value ascribed to innovation. The revolution sweeps away the old, and replaces it with the new. It stands for a flattening of the polity so that anyone can innovate – and anyone, indeed, can make a claim to being a revolutionary, irrespective of the basis of such a claim.

Revolutions frequently take place against the backdrop of the nation state (many Communist revolutionaries also take on nationalistic roles). In our view, this is no coincidence: modern revolutionhood is often imagined in ways analogous to the way modern nation states are imagined. In this respect, Benedict Anderson went rather further than we do when he contended that nations – through the mechanisms of modern media – are imagined as part of a narrative, with the nation itself as a hero, with enemies, space, a people, and sometimes, a standardised language. This narrative structure lends the nation-story *événementialité*, and of course, a scene (which in most people's minds is conflated with the imaged physical space of the national borders) (cf. Derrida 119). Anderson goes so far as to contend that in the imagined community, the nations themselves are characters, with personalities. Writing of the newspaper (which he saw as the daily novel in which the characters play their various roles), he remarks that if "Mali" disappears

> from the pages of the *New York Times* after two days of famine reportage, for months on end, readers do not for a moment imagine that Mali has disappeared or that famine has wiped out all its citizens. The novelistic format of the newspaper assures them that somewhere out there the "character" Mali moves along quietly, awaiting its next reappearance in the plot. (33)

Clearly following weakform versions of the theses of Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, Anderson suggests these transformations were to some extent enabled by the rise of print culture. McLuhan's strong-form thesis was that the Gutenberg presses gave rise to nations and vernaculars, and indeed, to modern democracies: his chapter headings give the idea: "Print, in turning the vernaculars into mass media, or closed systems, created the uniform, centralizing forces of modern nationalism" (199). Anderson rightly weakens the thesis to allow him to claim that the modern nation state arose later, and not in Europe, but in Europe's colonies, in the form of settler cultures finding distinctness – and a need to express it – from their metropolitan overlords. As we have noted in earlier essays, in words that accord well with generative anthropological analysis, the revolution – and the nation – is founded in bloodshed (Fleming and O'Carroll "Understanding Anti-Americanism").

Anderson's analysis helps us to understand the difference between two modern "revolutions" that define our terrain. First, the US war of independence is so called because it was *not* a revolutionary movement in the sense that we seek to define. It was, rather, an act of resistance to paying taxation to an expropriating foreign authority. It was an act of resistance against a group that were *defined* as foreign, albeit haltingly, and in the process of – sometimes genial and sometimes militarily aggressive – scapegoating of the "tea drinking" British (hence, legend has it, the American love of coffee). In the French Revolution, on the other hand, the violence was turned on the aristocracy, whose foreignness had to do with ideas of class – and the fact of course that they were above the particularities of the people they governed.

We leave till later the exploration of the anthropoetic dimensions of ostension and paradox. Suffice now to point to this obvious contradiction: on the one hand, innovation emphasised heightened individualism and – as its other paradoxical facet – innovation in the form of revolution offered fantasies of a combined social and political system which could be planned and organised, with everyone flattened out to have the same status.(4) In this respect, the Marxist revolutionary is especially significant because of his(5) success in claiming, even after mass murder, a kind of absolute ethical priority over other revolutionary leadership models, such as that proposed by, say, Adolf Hitler. In addition, more than the fascist revolutions of the early twentieth century, the Marxist has managed to operate within an historical backdrop extending from the mid eighteenth century to 1989, and often even beyond, to the present. This backdrop provides a rich seam of source material for analysis, enabling the identification of key processes and tendencies in the philosophical and rhetorical mantra of the modern revolutionary mode.

Revolutions may be marked with a distinctive rhetoric of modernity, but they are not all alike.(6) We should not, if we are interested in massive change (as Jacques Barzun is) mistake the scale of *murder* for the scale of *change* (3). Indeed, there have been other, quieter, kinds of changes, frequently with profounder effects than the noisy revolution. These changes include political transformations, of course, such as the American War of Independence (which shares in some, but not all, of the rhetoric of revolution), or the industrial revolution (which has no intentional dimension but is important as an order of change), the so-called "knowledge revolution" (part of a wider process of transformation in media and mediation), the "Green revolution" (a continuation of aspects of the industrial revolution), and so on. These are large scale transformations, but are not directly part of this inquiry into the rhetoric of political revolution.

As for the original revolutionary in this pantheon, there are also gaps between reality and the revolutionary's literary flourish. The project Marx pursued, he said in one of his greatest flourishes, was not to understand history but to change it. For us, though, the point is also to see that it was Marx himself who first noticed this and thereby changed history merely by *writing* it (the writing in this case is in "Theses on Feuerbach" 620), something that leads, as we shall trace later, to the possibility of a metaphysical layer to the rhetoric of the revolution, and the revolutionary). Further in so doing, he assigned his version of socialism centre stage, much as Hitler is lead dramaturge and, ostensibly, exemplary victim in the meanderings of his *Mein Kampf*.

The Figure of the Revolutionary

In his interesting reflection on modernity, Jacques Barzun points out that the rhetoric of revolution is *personalised*. He contends that revolutions "give culture a new face" (3). The next part of our inquiry involves seeing how that cultural "refacing" works as a rhetoric that is attractive, even today. Even superficially (and is not the hermeneutics of the face a kind of cypher available for coding?), the *face* of the present revolutionary is at once social and individualistic. The faces of Che Guevara, or of Lenin, or indeed of the many images whose faces are equated with revolution itself have been coded and recoded for generations. At stake here is an affirming value assigned to the revolution, and as synecdoche, to the *revolutionary*. This rhetorical pattern involves creating something that makes the audience into participants in a wider cultic movement for change, but a movement which is led *by* someone, a *figure* whose self-appointed task is to express a phantasmatic "general will," and to embody that will.

So the revolutionary's face is important, as we all know.(7) Yet in terms of generative anthropology, to put one's face forward (or for others to do so on one's own account), is a risky affair. It restores a centre, and risks resentment of central authority by those it seeks to enthuse – something that is rather an issue when, as with Castro above, he *becomes* the central authority. These exclamatory utterances do reflect real history, and indeed, if we

may put it thus, they give society an idealisation or image with which to work. They also give the image of life and of the priority of the live speech.(8) The exclamation mark in our title summons the excited, narcissistic, driven and driving figure of this particular kind of speech-work. The punctuation points to fragmented forms of ungrammatical thought ("As if I'd do that!"), as well as excitement, at least on the part of the utterer. As mark, it indicates also a relationship to immediacy, to orality, to priority over the written word. This priority is marked in the speeches of the revolutionary, even though it is almost always partially stage-managed, from notes, from a speech pre-prepared, its exclamation marks indicated in advance, perhaps rolled out intermittently to offset the sheer volume of verbiage.

A staging and scenic sense is always at work in revolutionary discourses. The revolutionary is a hero on "his" own stage. Such staging suggests an agonistics, a theatricality of idiom. In its victimary orientation (whether by the saintly and self-sacrificing figure of the wan revolutionary or the putatively misunderstood Hitler), the cast of the stage is profoundly Romantic. The scenes of mimesis and desire structure the appeal of the revolutionary in terms that Nietzsche called *ressentiment,* but which in terms of generative anthropology are at once victimary and modern (1.10; 472). The revolutionary figure is at once a sacralised and yet also emphatically secular figure – and it is one whose "end" has been announced from the very outset in the eighteenth century – but one which is still very much with us today, albeit as a postmodern figure of nostalgia. We may not want to live in Cuba, but they still produce *excellent* T-shirts. Yet whether nostalgically recalled or Romantically construed, the figure has always been, strictly speaking, *impossible*. Either the revolutionary must die young – before the ossification and complexity of reality fatally compromises the purity of promise – or else, the figure is corrupted, and one by one the believers fall away, disillusioned by the deception and alternately amused and fatigued by the ongoing self-aggrandisement.(9)

The figure is of course an absurd delusion, and at times an outright lie. After all, it is *hard* to be a messiah. If Buddha, Mohammed, and Jesus were able to live up to the expectations they raised, quite the opposite is true of the revolutionaries who "succeeded." Robespierre was a more *brutal* killer than Danton, but Danton too was a mass murderer. So were Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, and Castro; in a world system of Marxist legacy, so too were Mao and Pol Pot (between whom there is more a quantitative than qualitative difference). The premise and promise of the messiah is ascetic; yet even the ascetic revolutionary, however, found a need to slake a thirst for blood. And most revolutionaries who found themselves in charge of nation states were not in the least ascetic.

Many have characterised the massive social upheavals of the "Arab spring" as "revolutions." If we look at the leading *figures* (and figurations of these figures), there is a wide variety both in what "the revolution" sought to overturn and in what its leading figures proposed themselves as standing for. Some have participated in stock-standard Romantic revolutionary rhetoric, showing at least partially a revolt against authoritarian oppression of

a thoroughly modern and postmodern kind (embedded in the nation-state histories of which each took part). There were differences, too between the situations in Tunisia (the "successful" uprising led to democratisation), Syria and Libya (a descent into internecine warfare), Iran (where it was crushed), and so on. These were sometimes communal, sometimes religious, and sometimes national uprisings, revolutions of a kind to be sure and at times via charismatic leaders, sharing in that rhetoric – with all its attendant risks. Calling all this "the Arab Spring" is not a generalisation that tempts the authors of this essay, for all these reasons.

Unlike the central figures of the American war of independence, Washington and Jefferson, most other revolutions found their gravitational centre in more determinedly cultic leaders. After the Jacobin heroes, for instance – Robespierre, Danton *et al.* – there came the others: Cabet and Blanqui from France, but of course, Marx and Engels, who raised the stakes above nation-states to the identification of an entire class of people, based on what they took for the future, but which actually reflected, sometimes poorly, sometimes well, the past. In that characteristic 19th century move, Marx and Engels simply created a negative epistemology in which all who were praised previously now were to be overturned. That they claimed all were equal is without doubt; that they saw their version of communism and their own roles as its custodians as essential is also at stake here. By their own hand, and that of the disciples who followed them, the figures of Marx and Engels were at once secular and sacralised. This certainly did not pass unobserved (and the Gaullist, Régis Debray is perhaps only the best of many commentators who have remarked upon this religiosity) (see for instance, and he writes often of it, Debray 155).(10) Whether we are religious or otherwise, the secularity and sacrality of the leader is essential. The trouble is that the political revolutionary is ill-prepared to be a saint. Those that are (be it the Mahatma or Nelson Mandela) grew to live increasingly ascetically, and hence, perhaps, elude the title of revolutionary, for both, in their ways at once effected massive social change, yet both did so in an evolutionary rather than revolutionary way.

Rhetorical Figures

Having suggested that revolutions are modern and circumscribed by modernity, and then that they are themselves typified by a personalised figure-as-emblem who is imagined as embodying the movement or cause, we now turn to the textual formations that allow this scene to unfold, and to give sense to the self-styled leader at its centre. We take this in three steps. First, we look at examples of revolutionary discourse themselves. These reveal extraordinary paradoxes and contradictions, some of which are actually punlike, but some of which are simply breathtakingly foolish. Second we examine the metaphysics of revolutionary "cool" to see the relationship of this kind of discourse to realities today. Finally, we turn to the language-aspect of revolutionary language, what it defers, what it enables, and how it plays a role in social anthropoetics.

The rhetoric of revolution is filled with so many verbal plays that we have to proceed in summary form. To start with, there is a tendency to increasing *simplification*. Slogans, of course, *have* to be striking. They therefore use puns and paradox to create certain effects and, ostensibly, to make them memorable. The trouble is that the effects seem to travel in the same direction – towards a refusal of rational sense, towards absurdity. The ideals of revolutionaries are rarely merely incoherent in terms of socio-political realities. They are also – it seems exigently – paradoxical and often illogical in nature. This is one of the formal features of revolutionary discourse, both theoretical and "applied." We can see this simply by revisiting some of the slogans written as graffiti on the lecture hall walls of places like UP, Nanterre and the Sorbonne in 1968(11): "Le rêve est réalité [Dream is reality]"; "Crier la mort c'est crier la vie [to cry for death is to cry for life]"; "Pas de liberté aux ennemis de la liberté [No liberty for the enemies of liberty]"; and "La révolution est incroyable parce que vraie [the revolution is unbelievable because it is true]." If the first of these is not a million miles from a possible Microsoft slogan,(12) each of them seems at once absurd and yet appealing. Slogans of this kind operate in a number of ways, sometimes simultaneously. Without exhausting their resources, we can point to at least two aspects of their operation: they use logical ellipsis and are often paradoxical. Let us trace each of these slogans for a moment.

Take the common slogan, "Property is theft," a case of *logical ellipsis*. This expression can be analyzed in a number of ways, but if we want to say anything more than the fact it is not a syntactically sensible equation (that is, theft is neither the logical complement, nor is it an obvious attribute of property), we need also to concede that we know perfectly well what is intended. We can proceed by tracing it as a syllogism whose key premises have simply been omitted:

1. Property is a form of private ownership;
2. Private ownership is a less fair form of economic practice than public ownership;
3. Societies which enable less fair forms of economic practice deprive some members of their society of their birthright;
4. Deprivation of one's birthright is a form of theft;

Therefore, property is a form of theft.

Doubtless the case could be made in other ways, all of them requiring the supply of missing premises. The problem is, without the revolutionary going to the trouble of supplying all those complicated premises in order to construct a valid syllogism, we cannot see the weakness of its evidence, which, at every turn is not only questionable, but invariably tendentious and transparently self-serving.(13)

Moreover, and most important of all, at the site of any revolution that bears serious scrutiny, *paradox* is also involved. “Domptez par la terreur les ennemis de la liberté” [Tame liberty’s enemies by terror], Robespierre orders, “et vous aurez raison comme fondateurs de la république” [and you will be right, as founders of the Republic]. And what, for Robespierre, is such a republic’s government? “Le gouvernement de la révolution est le despotisme de la liberté contre la tyrannie” [The government of the revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny.] (Robespierre, “Sur les principes de morale politique“). Landing here, are we now so very far from Rousseau (a man, we should remember, Robespierre dubbed “the divine man”), who in *The Social Contract* states that “[W]hoever refuses to obey the General Will be constrained there by everyone: which means nothing other than one will be forced to be free”(14) (Part I, Ch. 7)? In all these contentions, as we now know all too well, these are not figures of speech – even if we pay a different kind of attention to Robespierre’s enforcement from the arguments of Rousseau. That is, he was one of the most murderous people of history to that point in time.

Like the drawings of Escher, of course, *logical* paradox is only a property of discourse, not the world, and the oscillations involved in these discursive creations have to be resolved in one way or another as they are forced into the social realm. Still, discourse is itself powerful and persuasive, and it is important to understand how this form of paradox works. Roger Scruton points out that beyond its formal features as a speech act, paradox sets out to both excite and destabilize; it is simultaneously an undermining force *and* a demand for commitment: “There is something in the human psyche which, faced with an unbelievable proposition, rushes forward to embrace it, to say ‘yes, it *must* be so!’, and to rejoice in the ruin of common sense that follows. A paradox may therefore be an act of defiance, in which the world of ordinary things is set at a distance and ridiculed” (Scruton 398). Of course, this is a risky mimetic game and the act of ridicule itself may end up looking far more ridiculous than its target, especially when seen with the benefit of historical distance.

It could of course be argued that the slogans of the street are not to be confused with the more complex realities of the master texts. Few who read the texts of the revolutionaries can maintain this impression for long, however. Indeed, the brevity of slogans have at least the merit of memorability and context. Take Frederick Engels at the grave of Marx, where he stated what he saw as Marx’s achievement in these bold terms:

> Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they

> must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case. (Engels, "Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx").

The problem is that any kind of materialist monism – like the one Engels is here advocating – in doing away with human intention (and mentation), or figuring this as simply as epiphenomenon of more basic casual factors, has to now somehow explain why someone *should* accept such an account (given that "should" seems no longer to have an ontological place). As the Australian philosopher David Stove once remarked, along similar lines: "Feuerbach, though he said that man *is* what he eats, was also obliged to admit that meals do not eat meals" (125. cf. 207).

We have until this point proceeded as if there were an actual argument that might, in another theatre, need to be debunked. Mostly it is not like this. Marx, in fact, is not even usually artfully paradoxical – he is much more clearly self-contradictory. The idea that base determines superstructure makes Marx's thought *itself* a mere epiphenomenon of more basic material realities; if thought supervenes on history in this radical sense, then it seems difficult to agree with the theory – not on the basis of its incoherence, but because the very notion of an act of mentation called "agreement" becomes inconceivable, given Marx's materialist ontology. Hence, materialism itself is a dubious basis on which to seek to erect *any* kind of argument. Criticisms of materialism – and the kinds of determinism which it invariably implies – have been launched from bases too numerous to list here, although the crux of the argument can be stated roughly as follows: whether the acceptance of the thoughts and theories which appear to consciousness can be wholly accounted for in terms of the firing of neurons or class consciousness doesn't matter epistemically – in either case, we will need to give up the idea that we accept the materialist's thesis for good reasons for the simple reason that "good reasons" cannot be causally relevant to the adoption of belief.(15)

One of Marx's rhetorical skills lay in the way he oscillated between an explanatory monism which he is forced to rescind as soon as he actually carries out historical analysis, analysis which is necessarily pluralist – partly because it *has to be*. Marx simply has to admit that consciousness – or ideas – contribute to human existence and history, but on the other hand, he *cannot* admit it in theory because if he does, this whole basis of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as both his "guiding principle" and "general conclusion" evaporates.(16) The ideological *is* an economy.(17) We might put it thus: Marx makes his own theory of history, but perhaps even he does not make it as he pleases. The reason he seemed able to bring off the impossible effect lies in rhetoric, as have seen, and is how – as we shall see – establishes the impossible metaphysical vanishing points of revolutionary change itself.

The Metaphysical Apotheosis of Communism: The Revolutionary Advertising Icon

> "No one has any intention of erecting a wall!" (Honecker 1961)(18)

So said Erich Honecker, the leader of East Germany – as the wall was being built…the phrase was later spray-painted onto the Western half of the wall as a sign of the standing lie.

Berlin Epiphany, 2014: a kid, not more than twenty years old with a touchscreen and earbuds, sports a red t-shirt. Red, primordial colour, signifier of revolution, faces etched in black: faces of men known intimately as Fidel and Che. Tomorrow, the t-shirt will be a different colour, an Andy Warhol print of Marilyn perhaps, or James Dean, followed, again, on Thursday, with a Coca-Cola image. We may be in Berlin, but this is Berlin after Steve Jobs, after Facebook. The wall – or rather its pitiful fragment – is a tourist destination, and the East is a stop on a tour-bus itinerary; and the East (as in Eastern Europe), in other words, is a signifier, and perhaps it always was. The revolution has, so to speak, become metaphysical. And nowhere, now, is it more metaphysical than the Berlin wall.

In the Berlin wall, we find a strange and repeating destiny of communism.(19) Aside perhaps from the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, few walls have so symbolised the fate and tragedies – and perhaps farces – of modern politics as well as has the Berlin Wall. Separating West Berlin from East Germany, it was officially referred to by so-called German Democratic Republic authorities as the *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall* [*Anti-Fascist Rampart*], an act of naming which implied that West Germany had somehow not been fully de-Nazified. Its fall on the 9th of November, 1989, ended twenty-eight years, but not the imaginary space of communism, and of the left which lingers uncertainly even today. It is estimated that around 5000 such "fascists" managed to escape to West Germany during these years. Few ever tried to "escape" in the other direction.

At one level, far from representing the death of communism, the fall of the Berlin Wall signalled its political apotheosis, its final victory. At this moment, revolutionaries the world over were finally relieved of having to reconcile their ideology with the world, to relate Marx's *Capital* to all inconvenient concrete political realities, to have to continue the exhausting effort of apologising for its manifestations or showing how these were "not really communist" after all. Revolutionary rhetoric was finally able to attain the transcendental status which it had always sought, as Pure Idea. If, at the end of this process, Marx was not left standing and Hegel was not fully turned right side up, the fall of the wall did show just how comfortable the former could be standing on his head.

Other barriers are less concrete. They are discursive – but no less paradoxical. The journal *boundary 2* – whose radical credentials were no doubt signaled to those of sufficient textual

sensitivity in its subversive deployment of the unicase *b* – announced the following change in editorial policy:

> The editors of *boundary 2* announce that they no longer intend to publish in the standard professional areas, but only materials that identify and analyze the tyrannies of thought and action spreading around the world and that suggest alternatives to these emerging configurations of power. To this end, we wish to inform our readers that, until further notice, the journal will not accept unsolicited manuscripts. (http://www.dukeupress.edu/Catalog/ViewProduct.php?productid=45602)

The editors have taken it upon themselves to provide what intellectuals – and, by some odd extension, the world *itself* – needs for the next few years, rather than relying on the vagaries of exchange. We would suspect – or at least hope – that we are not the only people to perceive a kind of unwitting comedy here, in the editorial policy. Part of it is surely related to a declaimed opposition to "tyrannies of thought and action" pursued via an *a priori* exclusion of points of view that don't already comport to the editors' conceptions of tyranny. It's at least a little like the joke about the vigilante so appalled by the actions of serial killers that he announces that he has taken it upon himself to systematically, one-by-one, do away with them all. We are in the realm, once again, of paradox, this time also in the domain of the *grand claim that has no effect whatsoever*.

Revolution reaches its highest point once it is completely free of referents. (20) Perhaps the only person who had the panache to suggest this was Roland Barthes, who in his dazzling tour de force,*S/Z,* suggested blithely that denotation is only the last of a series of connotations (16). His own encounter with poststructuralism allowed this kind of literary play to hold sway briefly in the Anglo-American university English department, yet we suspect a Marxist of the day would be surprised to learn that for Barthes, the pure revolution has no referent whatsoever. Instead, all we have is a sign-series which *recalls a past of reference*. Rather like Baudrillard's strange astrology (196) in which the signs of the Zodiac are used as analogies to capture the precession of orders of sign all the way back from an economy in which pumpkins were swapped for tomatoes, through gold, through promissories, until finally it breaks free, the sign of the origin of revolution is there on the kid's t-shirt as she stands there somewhere on the *Unter den Linden* wondering what on earth all the fuss was about, how anyone could have died for *this*. Metaphysical plenitude of this kind, however, raises questions of another kind: the social role of the imagined revolution, the structure of the self-contradictory exclamations we have traced, and the key issue of whether this really is harmless rhetoric, or whether perhaps it either defers – or even incites – appropriative violence.

Deferring/Inciting Violence: Exclamatory Paradox and Slippage

In considering revolution, we would be foolhardy intellectuals indeed were we not to take

seriously even now that its pronouncements, howsoever absurd or self-contradictory, are directed apparently at effecting real social change, real violence. In "his" self-account in other words, the revolutionary is seeking not to defer violence, but to incite it. In order to tease this out further, we return to the structure of exclamation itself, and discover there more nuances than are at first evident.

In one of Eric Gans' earlier works on forms of language, *The Origin of Language*, the case of exclamation is raised in the following way:

> If in hurting myself in the presence of another I say "Ouch!" I am not merely expressing pain but encouraging my interlocutor to observe the source of my pain – say, for example, having struck my thumb with a hammer. A mere cry of pain would not have this effect – and we might note that "Ouch" is not used unless the source of pain is clearly external… the use of the ostensive in the mutual presence of the interlocutors and the referent establishes, as the examples clearly show, the same relationships as in the original event, where the presence of the "sacred" object to the community-as-locutees was as essential as its presence to the community-as-locutors. (76-77)

If a sign says, "Revolution now!" or "Liberty or Death!" this has hidden in it this ostensive structure. Entirely consistent with this is the hidden imperative, or the appeal, or even the promise structure. In a book that seems to address itself to many of the paradoxes that confront such utterance-structures, Gans' *Signs of Paradox* suggests – perhaps paradoxically itself – that paradox itself is "anterior to truth" (54), and that paradox is the "problem that truth resolves" (54). This, in the case of revolution, does not seem to have ready application until we look a little further: paradox also allows us to see how language does not only avert the engagement with the desired appropriative object, but also, allows us to desire it, but on what he calls a provisional transcendental plane (54). If the revolution did only ever take place in this non-real world plane of language, then it does little harm indeed. And indeed, some of the more absurd recent cases we have taken are examples of revolutions that will take place purely rhetorically, and never take place *referentially*.

Gans, however, draws on work in all his previous thought to suggest that the ostensive sometimes also implies the *imperative*. Now the ostensive – or even where it becomes sufficiently articulate, the declarative – entails interlocutors who can bear witness to one another's wondrous revolutionary credentials, all on the plane of rhetorical and linguistic transcendence. But, as Gans suggests, sometimes the brute fact of the world is bluntly to the contrary, and the sign itself appears, for all its vehemence of articulation to be simply false. In such a situation, where no revolution appears likely, the imperative mood can make its appearance, a situation that (since the *Origin of Language*) Gans has counted as a moment of emergence from the ostensive mode. As he puts it in *Signs of Paradox*,

> This imagination corresponds to no perceptual reality: the sign is "false." Only its

> connection with its referent remains true in the imagination. This is the context of emergence of the imperative, which seeks to abolish the paradoxical oscillation between the falsity and the truth of the "inappropriate" ostensive. The paradox forces the thematization of the distinction between absence and presence, with the result that instead of mere imitation of the ostensive sign, the acceptable response to the imperative is the making-present (the transformation into presence) of its referent. (55)

But there is a problem. If the revolution is not at hand, it is not going to manifest and happen "now" and people in shops trying to choose between "apples or bananas?" will find *that* a more meaningful bifurcation than the T-junction of "liberty or death!" Mere rhetoric on this occasion does not miraculate a revolution into being.

The problem has not gone unnoticed of course. The deconstructive approach has yielded some useful fruit in this respect. Jacques Derrida's meditation on the title of a conference, "Whither Marx?" is both wittingly and unwittingly apposite. How, Derrida seems to be asking, does an event actually *happen?* His word for the problematisation of the event – *événementialité* – captures the issue (119), but his example, aptly enough concerns the title of a conference. Derrida repeatedly asks what this can mean, and does so with recourse to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the ghost which creates events simply by "appearing" (30-32). The appearance of a ghost is at once spectral (to use his word) and for that reason, both an event, and a non-event. The same air of unreality, he notes pervades the way Marxism manifests in ghostly fashion, and does so as something we *inherit* (46). In a world where Marx emphasised the materiality of things, it seems strange that Derrida was able to stage an entire problematisation of his life, work, and legacy in terms of what he rightly calls a "*hantologie*" (31).

Derrida's commentary on Marx and his spectres is powerful enough – as far as it goes. The trouble is, he never posits in any positive sense, the risks of this spectrality. Instead, a little bravely, a little Quixotically, he proposes his own theses on the kinds of analysis needed (134-42), as well as two "interpretations" of what he contends (142-44). There is no revolutionary appeal structure in this, despite the content of the injustices he protests – this is analytic provocation, not an appeal to arms. We feel this before we know it, and we feel it because of the absence of revolutionary *rhetorical* exclamation.

Gans, by contrast, does not even need to say what happens if violence is not only not deferred, but incited. An incitement to violence may be, nearly always is, rhetorical. It may indeed, as he says, remain tied to the transcendental plane of language. The plane, however, is as he also says, *provisional*. There is nothing other than an absence of referential correspondence to prevent the mimetic fury that revolutionary rhetoric (be it of first-half of the twentieth century fascist, or of communist, rhetoric) spilling into the domain of conflict that language in an originary sense defers. The violence is deferred by the cry of the first utterance: it is indeed possible for that cry to become the cry of the mob in full fury.

Revolution now?

The revolution appeared, we have suggested, as part of modernity, and is no more an ancient thing than the modern nation state. It appeared, at times, to address massive social injustice and suffering. It gave shape in the form of mimetic resentments that were shared in the emerging mass society of the eighteenth century. Yet even the early anti-metropolitan battles for independence were not of this kind: the abstract rhetoric of revolution did not emerge fully then, just as it did not emerge fully in the theologies of Levellers and democrats in Oliver Cromwell's army. These, however, were important precedents for any actual revolt. The rhetoric of revolution in Paris, 1789, really was new, and even though Girard did not state it as such, we do indeed see this as a signal moment in the history of revolutionary rhetoric. Since then, however, there have been many transformations, especially in the aftermath of "successful" revolutions, such as in the Soviet Union in 1917, and in Berlin less than twenty years later. One might think that after such precedents, that the rhetoric of revolution would have been tarnished. Yet it has not been.

In this essay, therefore, we have sought to confront the puzzle of how the ostensibly alienated and outcast have now become not merely a version of "the cornerstone which the builders rejected," but signifiers of *cool*. Not only is there mimetic behaviour at the level of a new, anthropoetically conceived political economy (there never was any other kind), but that the resentments of the original revolutionaries have yielded to another currency in which the sign of protest is actually a sign-in-denial of subscription to the mainstream order. Now, we have reached an apparently impossible situation where the revolutionary is exactly isomorphic with the radical, Randian capitalist. Both have rendered real things abstract. Neither values the person *per se*, in the Kantian sense of for him or herself – rather, "ideas" of the person (or whatever) take their place. In all this, of course, the prospect of any real revolution seems increasingly unlikely.

In the mimetic instability of violent warfare, modern technology has enabled not only the purveying of revolutionary discourse and the face of the revolutionary icon to far parts of the nation state (in the nineteenth century) and the world (in the twentieth), but enabled slaughter of an almost hitherto unimaginable kind. If the revolutionary, like Benedict Anderson's modern nation-state, is steeped in blood, we might be thankful that the dreamscape and apotheosis of the revolutionary in the contemporary world is one in which the revolution is so pure that it hardly takes place at all. But this may only be a temporary state of affairs.

We have dwelt on the case of Marx (and of Marxism) because this is the most long-lasting legacy, as Derrida suggests. Something in this rhetorical body, be it the allusion to material realities or the abstruseness of terminology, holds strong appeal, even today. His books are usually long, and littered with code words and phrases like surplus capital, political economy, the dictatorship of the proletariat and so on, so there is a need for explanation. At

their rhetorical finest, as in parts of the *German Ideology* or the *Communist Manifesto*, we see pure resentment at work: they are splenetic tracts directed very often not at the capitalists, but at those most proximate socialist movements Marx correctly discerned as his *true* enemies. And the "spectres" of Marx (to use that Derridean phrase to describe that legacy) are indeed suggestive of the dangers of descent into resentment even now. In response to the failures of the master-text, the disciples became increasingly ingenious. There is pathos of a kind in the brilliance of some of the contortions in their works. Louis Althusser's homage in the title, *Lenin and Philosophy*, still clove to the fantasy, but in his essay in that volume, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist theory," he deferred, almost indefinitely, the arrival of any material impact on culture whatsoever. Citing Marx (not least the *German Ideology*), but in a very selective way, Althusser was able to find a new terrain in the space that deferral opened up. Indeed, in place of class struggle over wages, the revolution becomes virtual, with him *now* seeing "*ideology* as the universal element of historical existence" – and that class struggle itself somehow takes place *in* ideology (Althusser 141). That this is "Marxist" can only be countenanced if one accepts that it is symmetrical to his view but inverted; ideology is now the generative principle rather than an epiphenomenon. This "Marxism" is, of course, a very comforting view for academic revolutionaries whose stock in trade *is* ideology and its debunking.

The Romantic revolutionary figure still stages "himself" anew, be it nostalgically as Derrida suggests in his subtitle ("mourning") or as part of the answer to the economic circumstances of the new Europe, or again, most commonly in an internet advertisement for the last revolutionary new consumer item: in this case, we see that a new metaphysical quality has overtaken the revolution, and it seems to suit Facebook somewhat better than the posters of the nineteenth century. It seems that in the movement to mass society the revolution became possible. After that, though, when the revolution became pointless, all that is left is a futile gesture – an abstract metaphysics of cool.

In this essay, we have taken our analysis of the rhetoric of revolution through a series of stages: we began with examples from the recent past, we traced the links of revolutions to religiosity and the binding of peoples together into a group. This however led us to consider the hagiography of revolution: the figure of the revolutionary-as-Romantic leader. For all its accuracy in capturing a caricature of the image of the revolution, however, the problem then became one of the way language forms and discourses create these master-figures. On the one hand, we sought to show how the revolutionary discourse could be both self-contradictory and *also* then empty of denotative content (though not of connotative sense). These paradoxes, however supplied a clue to seeking the anthropoetic paradoxes that signal the appropriative nature of revolutionary rhetoric, and enabled the tracing of whether (as we suspected) at present most revolutionary discourse operates to defer violence, but has always the potential for its incitations to take hold.

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Notes

1. We might, parenthetically, how close this archetypically revolutionary slogan now sounds to the language of personal development; *Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible* could easily be the title of a book written by Anthony Robbins or Dr. Phil. Castro – rhetorically at least – isn't a very long way from either. (back)

2. See John Milbank 9-25. (back)

3. If revolution has a contemporary date, the idea *itself* is based on a very old word. It comes to us from Latin, whence the earliest sense of "a revolving" or turning back. Part of our inquiry d*oes* concern the origin of revolution in ancient politics. Yet revolution is also a

distinctly modern word, and this is also, equally, a point of origin. It appears first in English in the political sense of "a revolution" in connexion with the overthrow of King James II in 1689 ("Revolution"). Before this, it had already gained its modern sense in France, where the idea of a *Révolution d'état* had gained currency in 1636 (*Petit Robert* 1711). (back)

4. This kind of uneasy shuttling between the valorisation of the individual and the collective is seen very clearly in the work Jean-Paul Sartre, whose *Being and Nothingness* on the one hand, and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* on the other, clearly encapsulate this uneasy valorisation of both the individual (as standing by himself or herself, independent of the group) *and* the valorisation of the group (standing by itself, incorporating the individual in the name of a greater cause). (back)

5. And it almost invariably *was* a he. (back)

6. In this respect, a useful commentator on modernity is Jacques Barzun, who writes that "[w]e have got into the habit of calling too many things revolutions" (3). He nominates just four key revolutions, or "quakes" as he calls them: those in the sixteenth century (religious); the seventeenth century (monarchical); the eighteenth century (French individualist); and the twentieth century (social) (3). Barzun indicates on the one hand, the need to categorise the sites of actual change (society, politics, culture, language, food and so on), and on the other to pay separate attention to the rhetorical dimensions of revolution that have as much to do with Romantic conceptions of the outsider-self as they do with this or that social change. (back)

7. Cf. O'Carroll the "Cultural Studies intellectual" is a similar kind of figure, riven by similar hypocrisies and compromises (176-77). (back)

8. It is this supposed ontological priority and authenticity of the oral that Derrida took issue with in *Of Grammatology*. (back)

9. In this essay we confine our comments mostly to left wing revolutionaries, mainly because their claims are presented as being in the interests of others, appropriating the garb of piety. The comments apply also to revolutionaries of the right, especially in 1930s Europe. (back)

10. René Girard and Debray have had a strange and discontinuously hostile series of exchanges. Perhaps the best place to gain a sense of these is in the actual conclusion to *Les Origines de la Culture* where Girard devotes the entire chapter to evaluating aspects of Debray's work on religion (249-78). (back)

11. All quotations of this kind have been sourced from "Des slogans de Mai 68" http://users.skynet.be/ddz/mai68/slogans-68.html (back)

12. We should remember that Apple's last international slogan was "Think Different" and AT&T's very successful phone advertisement instructed us to "Reach out and touch someone." (back)

13. Perhaps, though, the revolutionary is only kidding. After all, property is not *really* theft. Perhaps these kinds of formulations are puns, requiring intellectual work on the part of the passer-by. .(back)

14. "Quiconque refusera d'obéir à la volonté générale y sera contraint par tout le corps : ce qui ne signifie autre chose sinon qu'on le forcera d'être libre." (back)

15. There are many examples that could be given. It is, for instance, behind Husserl's critiques of "psychologism" and "naturalism" – see Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*. Trans. J. N. Findlay(London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970). esp. pp. 98–108, 225ff and *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) esp. Appendix I, "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity," 269–99. Similar logic is at play in analytic work on epistemic warrant, mental content, and "cognitive suicide." See, for instance, Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford University Press), esp. 256; Lynne Rudder Baker, *Saving Belief* (Princeton University Press, 1987); Victor Reppert, "Eliminative Materialism, Cognitive Suicide, and Begging the Question", *Metaphilosophy* 23 (1992): 378-92; and William Hasker, "The Transcendental Refutation of Materialism," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 11 (1973): 175-83 and *The Emergent Self* (Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. pp.1-26. (back)

16. This is how Marx states it after introducing it in this way:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. *Preface of A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface-abs.htm (back)

17. A similar point has been made before, although not in quite the same terms, by Phillips 132-7 and Eddy 29-30. (back)

18. “Ich verstehe ihre Frage so daβ es in West-Deutschland menschen gibt, die wönschen, daβ wir die Bauarbeiter der Haupstadt der DDR da zu mobiliesieren eiene Mauer aufzurichten ja?….Niemand hat die absicht eine Mauer zu errichten!” [I understand from your question that there are people in West Germany who’d like to see us mobilise the builders of the GDR captital to erect a wall…No one intends to erect a wall!” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjgKKOdVRx4 accessed 16 February 2014; text partially supplied by postcard, Echte Photo, Kunst und Bild 1 Berlin; based in turn on a *Neues Deutschland* news-story cited as 15 June 1961; Trans. Assistance, Ton Schaad). (back)

19. Here we can count, among others, Hadrian’s Wall, The Great Wall of China, the Moroccan Walls, and the Wall of Troy. (back)

20. It is somewhat akin to those rock bands whose poverty and “street cred” orients their lyrics – an orientation which can no longer be drawn on, at least believably, when they are multi-millionaires, living in affluent suburbs. (back)