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Terrorism of Expression as a Means for the Sake of Freedom

Some twenty years ago, when I was working on my doctoral thesis, a Sociology Professor told me that he had dreamed one day of becoming a writer. But, he told me further, I never knew what moves writers, that's why I quit literary studies. I only knew one thing all my life: Such authors as Walter Benjamin or Theodor Adorno, whose paths to their own expression were not possible to be decoded, were far more interesting than such ones as Georg Lukács or Max Weber.

I would therefore place the first two authors, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, among the group which I call the *authors of silence*. That means for me, authors who shape the sentences out of silence, bringing them into life as the result of a struggle against silence. But what does silence really mean? In the context that matters for the sake of art, of creation in freedom, for the sake of everything that prevents life from being an "eternal view of destruction", as Friedrich Schiller wrote more than two centuries ago, silence could also mean a sort of threat, a condemnation to oblivion, a negation of the right to live and let live, precisely *not* in the sense of a struggle for life.

Some further steps have been made since the debates about engaged art and ideology, since Sartre's *literature engagée*, since Peter Weiss' *aesthetics of resistance*, since many others who have not quit searching for the right measure, the right weight, who have not given up trying to represent the un-representable. Between silence and triviality, we seem to have at our disposal a wide highroad, or at least an open field of aesthetical virtualities. But I don't think we do. The resistance of the text is proportional to the challenges of which we become aware, which touch us or even penetrate us deeply, but which we can't let turn into expression. I'm not speaking about the epidemic agitations following clear geopolitical interests under a cloak of religion. Nor am I speaking about the risks which freedom must take, otherwise it would not be free.



Instead of that, I'm speaking about the obscure web of implications from which the human condition never can escape. We must not take the cloud for Juno. If we do so, if we remain by the letter forgetting the desire to search the ways which could bring us to an idea of spirit, we profess well-intended commonplaces such as "freedom of expression is a high good", "religious feelings deserve respect", "some regimes pour oil into fire", "violence is not always unjustified", etc. But we all know that the problem lies somewhere else. Perhaps we do not even know where the problem is, but we know almost always what it is *not*, I mean, we are able to differentiate instinctively the ways to explore a subject for a newspaper article, for a radio feature, or for a written text.

By this time I should have begun to explain the title of my paper. If I seem to be beating around the bush it is because I'm perhaps afraid to be misunderstood. Many of us had the opportunity to live radical historical changes, from censorship to liberty of expression. Those who have made such experiences had also to look for fractures within the system, into which is always possible to pour what we would like to say, or at least to suggest it. We know the text tension, the challenge to improve. This might even produce a great thrust of adrenalin in censorship times, which might also later contribute to our own mistrust the freedom of expression, as the natural consequence of a democratic evolution. But here we also know the slings and arrows of the book market, the inner tension caused by our own aesthetic censorship, so that in the end there is no wide highroad, no open field for our creation, just a small gap between anger and longing, between engagement and reflection.

How can we therefore make a step beyond the discussion about engaged art? Here I would say that engaged art goes beyond the discussion itself. This is not merely a speech game. We all feel it each time we experience the necessary, although not always urgent dimension of a work of art, in such a way which is always more than words could say. But we must work with words, which remind us that each tug of war between spirit and letter often leads to a clash of fundamentalisms, not of cultures. Then cultures are resistant because they are versatile; fundamentalisms are fragile in their apparent toughness, in their real fear to get fissures into their walls.

Freedom is both, resistant and fragile. No power is able to defend it without making itself vulnerable. But the dilemma is that no power is able to defend itself without keeping liberty of expression. Neither is this a speech game. And also I must stress that the title of my paper has no



intention to play with the theme of this round table. Furthermore, I am convinced that freedom in its noblest sense, which goes together with human dignity, with human rights, always must be conquered against some kind of oppression, of prejudice, of self-complaisance, of secure thinking, against all those attitudes which tend to take things too easily for granted. Each of us has surely a different definition of freedom, more or less driven either by the desire to decide about our own ways of acting, of writing under the given conditions, or by the caution not to hurt someone else by our own actions, by our own writing. In any case I just care about the following kind of alternatives, which may well be mixed in different proportions: Freedom in positive sense of doing something, freedom in negative sense of not having to do something, freedom to care about someone else's feelings, freedom to face contradictions. In this last case freedom begins to take another shape, to become a sort of civil courage, to give the linguistic expression speech acts its full sense.

But even all these forms of freedom tend to become common places, especially nowadays. It's enough to wrap them into a journalistic jargon, which may flatten and dissolve each text by ignoring its context or, even worse, by creating a false context dictated by immediate interests. But here again I would not like to be misunderstood. To put it into a sentence, we should not forget aims over useful purposes. I'm not establishing hierarchies. I'm just speaking of different things. In the same way I refuse any attempt to put limits into liberty of expression, I would like to stress that one literary aim may be a kind of terrorism of expression, as a consequence of freedom and for the sake of freedom. Here I am at last at the point where I have to explain what this means for me. But it is not an easy job. Otherwise it is too easy to imagine some kinds of shocking effects, of language attacks, of sado-masochistic descriptions. But this would perhaps never leave the significant level and remain as epidermical as an angry person burning a flag at a demonstration (and this is not only a scene we experience today; several decades ago we often saw the burning of American flags at demonstrations against the Vietnam War).

To leave the epidermical level will not lead us to any kind of "essentiality", which is a construction of the mind and simply does not exist. Instead of a nebulous "Empire" we live in a networked world. Every art producer has known and felt this for many centuries, in any case before he or she could dream about the existence of a world wide web. What we really know is the existence of the world as a battle field, a mine field with some beautiful places, some landscapes,



some houses, some cafés, some works which cannot but bring us into a permanent astonishment. But the battle field, the mine field is everywhere, even if we feel secure. It is just the price of freedom, which many of us would like to push away. We notice it at the mere level of words when I try to legitimate my positions in order not to be misunderstood, precisely as if I walked over a mine field. And the occasional explosion would not come from some kind of anger which my words could provoke in you, but from inside, from my own conception of living within the reality of the texts, of their networked implications.

We could also see that metaphorical mine field as a severe warning about the need to differentiate. Each painful situation and memory on one side, but also each cliché, each commonplace on the other side, may be a mine. And how can we write about what is marked by mines by forgetting them, by concentrating on what is between them? Mines are not only local metaphors; they have also a temporal life in our individual and collective memories. I use them here as metaphors for what would destroy perhaps not really our safety but most of all that tension, which is indispensable for a work of art to achieve its polysemic dimension, its resonance of former stories, of lives which remained perhaps without expression, but were nevertheless lived. Perhaps you recognize here the old claim put forward by Walter Benjamin in his historical-philosophical theses, written down few months before he committed suicide in a small hotel at the Spanish-French border, in order not to fall into the hands of the Nazis.

But rescuing the forgotten begins by our own History. In the middle of the 19th Century Karl Marx wrote, while reasoning about the Jewish Question, that the Christian State is the *Christian negation of the State* and not the political realization of Christianity. By replacing Christians by Moslems, by comparing History with present times, we are doing more than summing up History; we are mainly rescuing the European memories of all that long process of secularization during the Modern Age, which gave birth to possibilities of tolerance and coexistence, by separating religion and politics. This was made possible – and the work of Thomas Hobbes is perhaps the best example of it – by putting pacifying people and their satisfaction of basic needs over the religious question as a public one, not as a private one. Therefore, we are more likely to defend our cultural and political heritage of freedom and human rights, of plurality of expression, if we remember how dramatically it has been conquered. The History of the 20th Century, that Age of Extremes, reminds us too closely



that this same heritage of freedom and tolerance has been everything but granted. Even the coexistence of cultures, of groups, is no guaranty for the dialogue between them, which should always start from the beginning like a morning exercise. Let us start at Guantanamo.

Still we may ogle at the passion that moves masses in rage against freedom of expression when it is felt, as it was in the cartoon affair, and secretly envy that emotion picture show because we would like to have our own citizens also passionately mobilized for the cause of freedom. But we also forget too easily the individualistic implications of a guilt-culture. We are, so to speak, sentenced to pluralism, therefore to challenges made to our capacity to tolerate, not only people with different habits, beliefs and sensitivities but most of all situations and conflicts caused by practices which are incompatible with the democratic order and its claim to dignity. This differentiation could be a criterion to help us breaking the chains of political correctness, which make people blind to the necessary clarification of the contradictions and should take a little help from our cartoonist friends. In any case I find political correctness a much more suitable stuff to be worth of satire than any kind of deity, who in our secularized society rather lacks of flesh and blood and therefore of explosive potential.

It took Europe many centuries to learn how to differentiate powers, religions, competences, perspectives. The analytical sciences even intensify that tendency. But only art can retie the threads which had in the past to be cut in order to have democratic liberties, freedom of expression. If I say art, I mean literature within it, with open limits and glass doors between the codes of expression. Because if literature does not produce a sort of butterfly effect, showing the implications of each simple story, of every apparently clear situation, if a text does not confront us with the unbearable dimensions of that life that must incessantly feed art, then you may look for a pocket book at an airport magazine store and have a pleasant flight. Don't worry, you are not on the passenger list of a hijacked plane.

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