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Political Demarcations: on their violence and on their political stakes

I.

* I will be concerned with a very particular form of violence.

(Form is the possibility of structure. Hence form is the possibility of structuring things, facts, events,... , i.e. the possibility of there being relations of one sort or another among items no matter how these items are themselves defined, pinpointed, circumscribed, ...)

* The violence I will be concerned with is the violence involved in particular sorts of *speech acts*. (See, for example, Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech*.)

* Among "violent" speech acts, I will be concerned with only one category, namely that which might go under the general rubric of "calling names". Calling names can be perceived as injurious.

* I will not be concerned with "calling names" in general. Rather, I will be exclusively concerned with the effects and implications of calling *ourselves* with a particular name (belonging to a more general class of names). I am referring to the *self*-attribution of the name "leftist", "radical", "communist", "anti-imperialist" and so forth. In short, I will be exclusively concerned with our calling *ourselves* X where X stands in for any of the above.

* Obviously, in being self-attributed, this name *cannot* be considered injurious privately by us who are proceeding to the self-attribution; for us, it is can only be considered noble instead. But on the other hand, being called X *by the other*, at least in some circumstances and contexts, might be considered highly injurious. An interesting asymmetry is involved here, heavy with ideological and political content.

II.

* Calling ourselves X, acknowledging being X, is never as simple as acknowledging, say, being of Greek origin, being a professor, being married, and so forth. The main difference is that calling ourselves X is claiming a particular *political* identity, thus amounting to an unambiguously *political* gesture. And political gestures, of course, divide. The ideological and political content mentioned is intimately related to this division.

* There is violence involved in such self-attribution (such division), even if only that of demarcating ourselves from --that of cutting ourselves off-- the non-leftist, the non-radical, the non-communist... This is the violence of calling *the other* names, at least indirectly and by implication, the names, precisely, of the non-leftist, the non-radical, and so forth, in short *the non-X*. This may fall under the rubric of "calling names" because the non-X, in becoming indirectly demarcated by our self-attributing the

name X (noble for us), is considered by the same token as somehow not noble, as somehow politically, ideologically or even ethically inferior. This form of violence constitutes a serious ideological and political issue in its own right. Compare Mao's: the communist should go about among the masses as the fish swims within water.

* The political and ideological issue of our self-attributing the name X --and thus proceeding to the violence of the corresponding demarcation-- has many aspects. Like all political issues, it is related to circumstances, to contexts, to overall political and ideological conditions, to power relations in general and so forth. As it should happen with all political issues, our stand on this particular one has itself to be gauged politically, i.e. according to political effectiveness. Political effectiveness is related, of course, to political tactics and thereby to political strategy. It follows that openly acknowledging being X should *not* be taken as a matter of course by those considering themselves as being X.

III.

* Acknowledging being X may come in various degrees and become expressed in varying tones of voice, ranging from coming reluctantly to concede being X to loudly proclaiming being X. There are ideological and political implications in distinctions such as that between stating our political identity (being X) and showing or displaying it by our practices (which include our *discursive* practices as well); actively claiming this identity and passively leaving it by; overstating and understating it; and so forth. These distinctions form the space wherein the issue of calling ourselves X can be addressed and its ideological and political implications can be gauged according to context and circumstance.

* In some circumstances or contexts, this form or degree can be decided by us; in some other circumstances or contexts, it is forced upon us. In the latter cases, the labels of communist, anarchist, terrorist may amount to accusations. The story of being labelled thus in various countries, contexts and circumstances (and the shifts in the corresponding accusations) is politically very instructive. Sometimes, not for just political reasons but also for deeply ethical or even existential ones, it may be forced upon us to, precisely, declare that yes, indeed we are X.

* The example of the Greek Civil War. The role played by the plebiscite of 1946 for the massive attribution of the identity (the charge) of being communist. The "declarations of repentance or of repudiation" people were 'asked' to sign.

* To be *accused* of being X amounts to perceiving Xs as politically dangerous for the authorities --or even the regime-- in place; it is to perceive Xs as a *political threat*. Among other things, this accusation trades on the violence implicit in our demarcating ourselves as being X and draws 'arguments' on that basis. Conversely so to speak, if the label X does not amount to an accusation, Xs are considered political inoffensive. The *political stakes* of ourselves acknowledging or declaring being X are intimately related to whether Xs are perceived as a political threat or not.

IV.

* Let us focus the discussion at actual (after 1989) circumstances or contexts in our so-called democratic countries.

* I want to claim that, particularly since 1989 and in most of our countries, openly declaring being X has lost much of its weight as a charge; someone's declaring being X has become politically indifferent. Overstating my claim, this is to say that our acknowledging or our proclaiming being some kind of X (leftist, radical, communist, anti-imperialist... but certainly *not* terrorist and, in most cases, *not* anarchist) leaves the authorities --as well as most people-- indifferent. In what follows I wish to concentrate on this indifference.

* First of all, why this indifference?

* We may answer schematically by claiming that this indifference is due to the fact that our being X is not considered politically dangerous for the authorities in place. Getting (at most) something like 10% in national elections, without the visible possibility of going beyond such a limit, makes the Left politically inoffensive. It can thus be left more or less alone. Leaving the Left alone in this sense constitutes a political gesture of the powers in place, a gesture sanctioning by the same token the 'impeccable' democratic character of the corresponding regime.

* Leaving the Left alone in this sense marginalizes it and hence pushes it to a kind of ghetto. What happens inside this 'ghetto' leaves others mostly indifferent. We could consider as an example here the various splits in the history of the Left and the generalized indifference toward the stakes of such splits and toward the fate of the resultant organizations.

* Being confined to such a 'ghetto' creates asphyxiating conditions for the Left. Our declaring unproblematically being X, our not considering the self-attribution of the name X as a political issue in its own right and our not handling it accordingly, reproduces the conditions of such asphyxiation: for the 'general opinion', as formed and entrenched by the state apparatuses and especially by the media, our calling ourselves X almost suffices to cancel out *what we are actually saying* in respect to the different issues confronting our societies, no matter how serious or how seriously studied what we are actually saying is. In other words, others tend to ignore what we are actually saying *because* we are saying it *as Xs*. Being called X thus amounts to our carrying a taint, a taint leaving its politically decisive mark on everything we are actually saying, a taint almost sufficient to nullify the content of all our sayings. Our continuing unproblematically to declare being X thus amounts politically to our *admitting* that we do carry this taint, a taint leaving to what we are actually saying almost no chance to go through. These are precisely the conditions confining the Left to its 'ghetto'.

* Among other reasons, Xs are perceived as carrying such a taint because '1989' has been generally perceived as a quasi-final defeat of the Left political project *in its entirety*, i.e. independently of the (important) differences among its various fractions. Apparently, the Left has done very little to take the bull by the horns in respect to this

all-important issue. What we should be doing to confront it is too big a subject; I have not the means for undertaking its discussion here.

* For the remaining of the paper, I want to concentrate on the taint in question. To my mind at least, acknowledging, first, the existence of the taint and considering, second, what routes we should be tracing and pursuing in order to shake it off our shoulders forms one of the conditions which could allow the Left to get out of its 'ghetto'. By the same token, this forms a condition for making the Left *effectively* dangerous again, with everything that this might imply.

* An example: the student movement during the Greek dictatorship and its handling of the attribution X. This kind of handling was repeated by some initiatives of engineers during the same period with impressive results.

* A very different example: the reception of the work of Jacques Derrida in contrast to the reception of the work of Edward Said as regards the Academia in general. Derrida's work was perceived as dangerous inside Academia although (and, I claim, to an extent also *because*) it never attributed to itself any X-like name. On the other hand, Said's work has been politically less effective inside Academia although (and, I claim, to an extent also *because*) it was perceived as emanating from an X-like position. This example is instructive: nobody could have expected that a work like Derrida's could possibly have this kind of political effects; before the event, Derrida could only be perceived as politically 'nobody'. I will return to the qualification "nobody" in a moment.

* Taking my cue from this example and to narrow down the issue in order to conclude, I will consider some questions of strategy within Academia (in the humanities and in the social sciences exclusively), always in respect to the self-attribution of the name X.

-- Within Academia and at the theoretical level, power relations are certainly at work. These power relations determine, among other things and at least to an extent, which particular subjects and which particular ways of approaching them are deemed important.

-- These power relations usually differ in the various countries and in respect to the various disciplines. Example: the rise of "cultural studies" in UK and in USA.

-- As regards issues of theory, the outlook of the Left should be, fundamentally, universalist in respect to all countries and all disciplines. Such a universalist outlook need not clash with local interests and areas of focus which are locally important.

-- American (or, perhaps more generally, English speaking) Academia is actually in the position of power, even in what concerns directly the Left. This is an effect of cultural imperialism: there is an important Left in the best American (and English speaking) universities and this Left tends by the same token to acquire a position of high prominence within the international academic Left. Not to be misunderstood, I should stress that this high prominence is related in most cases with the *quality* of the corresponding work. However there is certainly a political ambiguity here which has to be explicitly addressed.

-- The goal of the academic Left has to be hegemony at the level of theory. An inspiring example of the corresponding possibilities might be the situation reigning in Academia in the late 1960's.

-- Perhaps a strategy for getting out of the 'ghetto' as regards theory specifically might be the following: Work within the strongholds of the *opposing* theoretical camp without declaring but only implying that this work is indebted to our being X. In short, work within these strongholds without making a big deal of being X. Confront seriously all the prominent issues in these strongholds *in their own terms* while being critically inspired, of course, by the ideas 'defining' the position of X. Aim to undermine in the long run these very terms by coming to convince good willed opponents that what they base themselves on is wrongly headed, narrow and properly insufficient. This requires, of course, painstaking work. But this is the price to pay for achieving hegemony at the theoretical level.

-- This is a Machiavellian strategy: the 'nobody', the totally unexpected, 'someone' whose work had been perceived as more or less following the dominant modes of approach comes to win the day by retrospectively demonstrating that the basic condition of the victory was, precisely, the power of the ideas 'defining' the position of X.

-- Another way to say the same thing is that being X is much more a question of *effectively practicing* being X than of declaring being X. This is also related to the fact that declaring being X (or any subdivision of X) can interest, in the present political and theoretical conjuncture, only other Xs of this or the other variety. The ensuing discussion among such interlocutors can only reproduce the 'ghetto' while simultaneously erecting more barriers to keep out those already outside of it. This is a particular way of exerting the violence we have been talking about. Of course, the presently prevailing conditions are such that those outside the 'ghetto' don't even feel this violence. In common parlance, they couldn't care less.

* To conclude with one phrase: within the present political and theoretical conjuncture, it doesn't mean much, if it is not properly deleterious for the leftist, radical, communist, ... political project, to call ourselves --or stamp externally what we are actually doing as-- leftist, radical, communist, ...

* Thank you.

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