

NIHILISM AS EMANCIPATION¹

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ABSTRACT: Is the philosophical idea of nihilism compatible with a project of emancipation based on concepts such as autonomy, equality and freedom? This is the question to which Vattimo's contribution seeks to provide a response. For Vattimo, the notion of nihilism is inseparable from that of hermeneutics, understood as the historically situated character of universal claims. Rather than undermining emancipation, for Vattimo, a nihilistic hermeneutics is precisely what frees us from foundations, and should thus be understood as an emancipatory force. The article tries to counter a purely tragic understanding of nihilism with the constructive political horizons opened up by a nihilistic hermeneutics, which allows us to think anew the ideas of freedom and equality.

KEYWORDS: Apel; Emancipation; Equality; Freedom; Hermeneutics; Heidegger; Nietzsche; Nihilism

How can we speak about emancipation, that is, a process of liberation from constraints in the direction of greater freedom, autonomy, and possibility of choice, while associating it to concepts such as those of nihilism or hermeneutics? First of all, we should note that—as I had the occasion to show and illustrate in a number of books—the terms of nihilism and hermeneutics are here used as synonyms. Nihilism is understood in the sense inaugurally outlined by Nietzsche: the dissolution of all ultimate foundations, the awareness that—in the history of philosophy and Western culture in general—‘God is dead’ and ‘the real world has become a fable’. Is this valid only for Western thought and culture? This first difficulty is not thematically discussed here; yet, Nietzsche—and Heidegger, and Marx before him, and even Hegel—teach us that the growing awareness that we think only within the ambit of Western culture is indeed part of such culture and its nihilism, since the very idea of a universal truth and a transcultural humanism (as for example in the doctrine of natural law or ultimate grounds) matured precisely within this given culture. When Western philosophy becomes aware of this, it becomes nihilistic; it takes note that its reasoning is always historico-culturally situated,

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that even the ideal of universality is ‘comprehended’ from a determinate point of view. But with this nihilism becomes hermeneutics: a thought that knows it can aim at the universal only by passing through dialogue, agreement, or *caritas*, if you like it (see my *Belief* and *After Christianity*). ‘*Veritatem facientes in caritate*’: translated into the terms of today’s philosophy, this Pauline motto—which moreover echoes, maybe not from afar, the *aletheuein* of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*—means that truth is born in agreement and from agreement, and not vice versa, that we will reach agreement only when we have all discovered the same objective truth.

Emancipation is for us the meaning of nihilism proper if we read this Nietzschean term in the light of another crucial expression of the German philosopher: ‘God is dead, and now we wish for many gods to live’. The dissolution of foundations (in which we can even recognize the moment of the passage from modernity to post-modernity—see my *The End of Modernity*) is that which frees us—once again, with a profound echo of the Gospel ‘The truth shall make you free’. Does this mean that ‘knowing how things “really” are will free you’—finally discovering Pythagoras’ theorem? The necessary geometrical order of the world? Einstein’s relativity? No. Rather, it means that ‘truth is only that which frees you’; truth is thus first of all the ‘discovery’ that there are no ultimate foundations before which our freedom should stop, which is instead what authorities of every kind that want to rule precisely in the name of these ultimate foundations have always sought to make us believe. Hermeneutics is the thinking of accomplished nihilism, the thinking that aims at a reconstruction of rationality after the death of God, in opposition to any drift towards negative nihilism, that is, towards the desperation of those who continue to grieve because ‘there is no more religion’.

It is clear that all this has significant implications for the way one conceives of ethics, law, and politics. After the death of God, will it still be possible to talk about moral imperatives, laws that are not founded arbitrarily, and an emancipatory horizon of politics? My work does not delude itself into believing that it gives exhaustive answers to these questions; but neither does it limit itself to echoing them rhetorically—this is what much contemporary tragicism [*tragicismo*] does, exhausting itself in the rhetorical emphasis of the problematicity of the human condition, often in order to prepare a ‘leap of faith’ (which then becomes a leap into pure irrationality and the subsequent defection to the dogmatic authoritarianism of churches, central committees, and charismatic leaders), or, at other times, in order to maintain itself in the pure and simple awareness that ‘there is no solution’, with the tacit pretension that, socratically, knowing not to know is always better (Nietzsche was right in unmasking the optimistic rationalism of such a demeanor).

The hermeneutic exit from tragic and negative nihilism naturally also entails the retrieval of many of its aspects; one should say, with Nietzsche, that one cannot build without destroying. Or even, more realistically, one should say that the mother of all metaphysical authoritarianisms is always pregnant, hence the task of secularization—that is, the unmasking of the sacredness of any absolute, any ultimate truth—is far from having become outdated. Politics, law, and social life continually bear witness to this

claim, not only in Italy, where the Catholic Church continues to (demand to) impose unreasonable limits on the state's laws (think of civil unions, research on embryos, and euthanasia), but now also in international politics, where American dominance masked as democratic humanitarianism threatens to impose a kind of universal state of police which is 'legitimized' by an (alleged) respect for human rights, or those that the empire considers such. Won't the new Napoleon instigate some new 'romantic' rebellion of nations—of cultures, of 'people' (with all the reservations that should be induced by these terms)—against the armed *pax Americana*?

Trying to measure up to such problems—albeit in a very theoretical way—hermeneutics thus inherits first of all much of the critical and 'destructive' contents of tragic nihilism. But hermeneutics also harbours two openings towards constructiveness. First of all, the death of God does not claim to be a finally achieved truth, on the basis of which one could dogmatically found some natural law of atheism, of the 'unfounded' world, or of some Nazi-type *Übermensch*. The constructive nihilism of hermeneutics does not only have to defend itself from the neurotic return of authoritarianisms, but also from the metaphysical sclerosis of antifoundationalism (for instance, the latter easily goes hand in hand with the imposition of freedom and democracy by means of armed interventions against what President Bush named 'rogue states'—these usually are such, but it is not Bush or the United Nations transformed into an ethical court of law that can pass judgement on them). To all these distortions of nihilism, hermeneutics first and foremost opposes the very principle of the plurality of interpretations, that is, the principle of the respect for everyone's freedom of choice. Certainly, this is not much more than Habermas's communicative rationality; but the latter is here stripped of the remnants of metaphysical rationalism that still invalidate it—such a theory, with its idealisation of a knowledge freed from opacities and ultimately modelled upon the scientific method, always runs the risk of legitimising a future world dominated by 'experts' of various kinds. The critical weapons of negative nihilism thus remain decisive for the constructiveness of hermeneutics. Attempting to shape laws, constitutions, and ordinary political measures, according to the idea of a progressive liberation of norms and rules from any alleged 'natural' limit (i.e. one that is manifest only to those who possess power) can already constitute a positive political project. Recall that, already many years ago, a theoretician close to Habermas like Karl Otto Apel (see his *Transformation der Philosophie*) even accounted for the fight against world hunger on the basis of the respect for the equal rights of our interlocutor, which is imposed on us by any use of language, on pain of a performative contradiction. That is to say: even when I speak only to myself I have to respect some rules; I am responsible for such respect before any interlocutor, which means that I grant my same rights to any interlocutor; but then I must also positively guarantee him the conditions for the exercise of these rights, and consequently the human conditions of survival. Now, the hermeneutic (and 'nihilistic') ideal of founding every law and social behaviour on the respect of everyone's freedom and not on allegedly objective or 'natural' norms implies positive consequences that are much broader than those that Apel indicated in his work of the 1960s—after all without giving them

an explicitly programmatic development. For instance, peace—even when it is not understood too theologically as the ‘tranquillity of order’, according to Augustine’s phrase which the Catholic Church has used to justify its worst silences on Fascism and Nazism—is a basic human right whose topicality and problematicity has sadly come to the fore recently. Isn’t the reforming of constitutions and the drafting of laws that take into account rights like this also the basis of a positive political programme? At the end of the day, this is what marks the (necessary) passage from liberalism to democracy and, for us, socialism; in order really to achieve the rights of freedom preached by liberalism, we should not let things take place ‘according to their own principles’, as for example, in the laws of the market (there is an unacceptable ‘naturalism’ in Adam Smith!). Rather, we must build conditions of equality that, indeed, are not given ‘naturally’.

If we wish to summarize in a few words the meaning of a nihilistic hermeneutics—one that is, after all, an entirely open enterprise—what I myself see in it at this moment is a confirmation of Heidegger’s thesis on being as ‘event’, and not as a stable structure given once and for all (what Heidegger calls ‘metaphysics’). An event that is possible only on condition that being ‘is not’, or is no longer—on condition that God is dead and that the eternal structures of values have been unveiled as a lie. Only on condition of traversing the experience of nihilism understood in this way is it possible to plan a society where freedom will not be an empty term: truth is always ‘to be made’, and thus values are always to be invented anew. It is in nihilism thought in this way that equality finally establishes itself, and what Richard Rorty calls solidarity becomes possible—or better necessary—for life, the only possible basis for a truth that does not claim to evade the historical conditions in which existence is always ‘thrown’.

Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa

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