

Democracy and Revolution: An Essay on Temptation and Anxiety

Risto Solunchev

Two great bands, *Rage against the machine* and *Tool* in 1993 created a great song named *Revolution*. However, they didn't publish it on any official album considering their own aesthetical criteria. The lyrical lament of the refrain is very instructive: "You can kill the revolutionary, but you can't kill the revolution!" It's a quote from a Black Panther member Fred Hampton who was killed 4th of December 1969 in his house by the Chicago police. Here, we have an idea of the revolution as a constant change not only by radical means but rather with radical meaning and efficiency in constant historical perspective. In deeper sense, this song implies an idea of revolution as self-efficient, like a kind of virus which survives the current conditions and continues to live in postponed virulence waiting to become active, only using a human body, in this case the body of the revolutionary, as a host, as a secondary source in which the idea transits to its occurrence in the social and political reality. Revolution by itself makes the revolutionary. We see hope that the idea is stronger than its keeper and barrier and surpasses his life.

At the same time the song reflects a condition of complete entrance into passivity, quietism, resignation, and belief that something ever would come in near future despite the objective causations that determine the revolution. And all of this is followed by existential anxiety that explodes on refrains in the 'hysterical' voice of Zach de la Rocha. So, my aim in this text is to make this postulate, that revolution is a live concept without the revolutionary, questionable. One of the conditions for the revolution is the very revolutionary's consciousness and this is not only the psychological basis which has repercussion on reality, but in its inner sense is the ontology of the revolution as a phenomenology. The revolution is impossible not only because of the contemporary technology of absolute control as the sphere of physical causality, but merely because of the contemporary leftists, who already transformed into pure liberals, have annulled the conditions for revolution within the philosophy of political being through the concept of absolute democracy and its efficiency, and accepting these ideas revolutionary consciousness just neglected and abolished the prima ontological ground for revolution, namely, teleological suspension of the democracy. The revolutionary goes against its own being. Revolutionary consciousness is in a kind of Kierkegaard's condition of Abraham, to whom is given to choose between the religious existence and ethical judgment, in constant anxiety and temptation.

The idea of Europe is a result of historicity, and hence it's never finished. We do not have any ontological *eidōs* of Europe, a kind of *imago Dei*, but we consider Europe and its extension out of its nominal borders as a democratic Western civilization which grounds itself on the rationalization of political reality. This rationalization has been a historical process that somehow, even without Hegelian reference, emerges in teleological way,

namely, to produce some kind of ultimate progressive political reality. Democracy, which now has a form derived from the liberal standpoint, is intended to be a final solution for the political crises and wars. On other hand, Europe is born through the revolution, and there is another notion of democracy and freedom that could be established not before revolution but only as its results. So, I just want to see the dialectical relation between these two concepts that have such a significant meaning for continuation of the European legacy.

1.

Hence, my main question is: Is revolutionary consciousness possible in the context of absolute democracy that proliferated itself as a universal yearning for united world, as one pseudo-universal world-machina? Revolutionary thinking is a radical thinking and it's based on a political ontology. Liberalism is quite the opposite; it tends to negate the political and to create a post-political perspective.

We live now within theoretical and practical reign of globalization and universalization of the liberal democracy as a universal rational consensus. This rationalism inaugurates one crucial pair of two concepts that exclude each other: *political as antagonism* and *democratic procedures*. Liberals, as rationalized leftists, created a notion of absolute democracy, and they shifted the political being, political substance, into the sphere of morality, so the political is no longer a struggle among the antagonistic ideologies but rather a matter of rationalism and individualism. Karl Schmitt criticizes this standpoint with the core objection that individualism neglects the political, considering that the individual is the last referential point. As he asserts: "The critical distrust of state and politics is easily explained by the principles of a system whereby the individual must remain *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem*" (Schmitt 70, 71). Liberalism as a methodological individualism completely ignores the state and politics and directs itself towards intellectual praxis. Or as Schmitt claims: "Liberal thought evades or ignores state and politics and moves instead in a typical always recurring polarity of two heterogeneous spheres, namely ethics and economics, intellect and trade, education and property" (Schmitt 70). Simply, liberalism attempts "to tie the political to the ethical and to subjugate it to economics" (Schmitt 61).

So, we could address the question: if this absolute inclusive rational consensus is possible? Liberalism in its essence, as Mouffe claims, is an attempt for negation of the political, through its tendency to reduce itself to a liberal critique of the political and endless procedures. It has "neither advanced a positive theory of state nor on its own discovered how to reform the state, (...) it has produced a doctrine of the separation and balance of powers, i.e., a system of checks and controls of state and government. This cannot be characterized as either a theory of state or a basic political principle" (Schmitt 61). Chantal Mouffe uses the Schmitt's criticism to find the way to establish a more advanced leftist's strategy that keeps the concept of antagonism as a core of the very political. By 'the political' she means "the dimension of antagonism" which she takes "to be constitutive of human societies", while by "politics" she means "the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the politics" (Mouffe, *On the Political* 9). Society is always permeated with political investments, and the democracy cannot be liberated in an apolitical key, as liberalists maintain.

According to Schmitt, democracy implies homogeneity of the demos; it assumes a kind of identity which creates itself through a constitutive exteriority. So, we must acknowledge “the hegemonic nature of every social order, and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency” (Mouffe, *On the Political* 17). Democracy is not an inclusion. Even notion of liberal political as an outcome of liberal cancelation of the political as such, is also a hegemony over the social reality. Every order is a hegemonic practice, and it’s nothing more than ideology. “Every order is political and based on some form of exclusion.” (Mouffe, *On the Political* 18) Is there a basis for existence of the social without his nexus with the political? “Schmitt makes us aware of the dimension of the political that is linked to the existence of an element of hostility among human beings. This can take many forms and manifest itself in very different types of social relations” (Mouffe, *The Return of the political* 3). According to Mouffe, liberal democracy as a political project can be understood as elimination of the rival models. It is apolitical by its core, and its goal is to be only possible model of the political thought and reality, as the end of a seeking path. Antagonism, or agonism as Mouffe develops it, in this absolute perspective, is already sublimated within the procedural nature of the parliamentary.

So, democracy as a final state is only possible as functional democracy: collision of legitimistic democratical and political positions, confrontation of unessentialistic claims and moral values. The struggle between the Left and the Right is an essentialist form which has been overcome. If we follow Jacques Rancière, we could say that we live in post democracy, in “conceptual legitimation of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests” (Rancière 102). There is no cleavage between the forms of the state and the state of social ontology. The Left accepted the importance of pluralism on the individual level (but neglects it on the political level) and the importance of liberal democratic institutions and this is, practically, a kind of castration of the radical thinking. The belief in the historical necessity of transformation of the existing hegemonic order is exhibited in the museum. Hence, a question follows: is the capitalism no longer hegemonic system or something has changed within the revolutionary discourse? We have leftists that have accepted the current condition as an end of the history. Paradoxically, they have become the best students of Fukuyama’s conservatism.

2.

But why and how did this shift happen? According to Ulrich Beck the progress is not a result of political struggles so we must reject them as irrelevant for further development of the democracy. Beck justifies Fukuyama’s metaphysical and ideological violence, on the bases of rationalistic premises that we must accept ‘common sense’ dictation which is the victory of capitalism. Individuals in the condition of liberal democracy constitute themselves through open discursive exchange, not through class struggles and collisions. The apolitical becomes political, and it gets its political significance not in the reality of the political but rather in the realm of language, regimes of vocabulary, discursive games of constructs and deconstructive mannerism. Human rights and accidental identities now become substance for

politics. This is at its core, “anti-political view of liberal democracy” (Mouffe, *On the Political* 19) that misinterprets the real dynamics of the political. For Beck, “the political constellation of industrial society is becoming apolitical, while what was apolitical in industrialism is becoming political” (Beck 18). He speaks about postmodern sub-political systems of resistances, and what was intimate and private now becomes political. The classes are no longer politically substantial, and contemporary thought subjects everything under the prism of depoliticization. “The political programme of a radical modernization is skepticism” (Beck 41).

According to Giddens, contemporary liberal democracy is a form of “de-traditionalization”. Traditionalists and fundamentalists should not be allowed to participate within the dialogue because they position themselves contrary to the historical course. (See Giddens, 1994) This is a kind of democratization of the democracy. This concept of radical democracy transforms the existent power relations and creates a new form of governing. The liberals are introducing the neutrality of the state. Within this democracy there is a place only for “ethical pathos and economic calculation” (Schmitt 73) For Giddens “the concept of classes has to be replaced with the concept of ‘lifestyles’” (Giddens, *The Third Way* 19). Liberalism tries to connect everything to social solidarity and to partnerships between the state and civil society considering the methodological individualism. Simply, “a private person has no political enemies. Such a declaration can at most say that he would like to place himself outside the political community to which he belongs and continue to live as a private individual only.” (Schmitt 51) According to Giddens we’re experiencing the post-traditional society, life politics, and self-actualization. All those issues concerning life politics cannot be expressed within the left/right framework, because the political power is decentralized. We could say that dynamics of the individualization is the core of reflexive modernity. The democratic debate is envisaged as a dialogue between individuals whose aim is to create new solidarities and extend the bases of active trust. “Conflict can be pacified thanks to the ‘opening up’ of a variety of public spheres, through dialogue, people with very different interest will make decisions about the variety of issues which affect them and develop a relation of mutual tolerance allowing them to live together” (Mouffe, *On the Political* 48).

What is indisputably problematic here is that we are witnessing the unchallenged hegemony of neo-liberalism with its claim that there is no alternative to the existing order. This is completely quasi ideological claim because it gives conditions as arguments: since the collapse, disappearance of antagonism, politics without frontiers, without ‘they’, and cetera. Liberalism maintains that the political frontiers have dissipated, but also, as a liberal politics it’s trying to strengthen this situation and to proliferate it through the political and social institutions. The power of the state is now used to convince the people that there is no power. The pure ideological action is hidden behind the ethical appearance of judgment. Hence, the other is not a class anymore, it’s not a part of the dialectical movement of the absolute, it is just a lifestyle, and from this standpoint you judge him completely apolitically, using phrases as morally ineligible, outdated, non progressive et cetera. “They present political debate as a specific field of application of morality and believe that it is possible to create in the realm of politics a rational moral consensus by means of free discussion. In this case politics is apprehended not through economics but through ethics or morality” (Mouffe, *On the*

Political 13). We are dealing with an “exclusion justified in pseudo-scientific grounds” (Mouffe, *On the Political* 55). Simply, the political antagonisms are “being formulated in terms of moral categories” (Mouffe, *On the Political* 75).

It is a game of perfidy and sophistry. You are forced by the arguments of most popular sociologists to accept the rationality of liberal democracy, so if one is opposed to it automatically is being perceived as irrational and this is a sign of moral backwardness. Beck is raving about some “cosmopolitan capitalism” that produces a universal humanity or even new anthropological nature, and ultimate implication is “all societies should adopt liberal democratic institutions which are the only legitimate way to organize human coexistence” and there is no alternative to “westernization and its rationally acceptable results” (Beck 110). This concept of humanity that achieved its highest level in establishing a liberal democratic society is a representation of the general humanity, and hence it should be applied to whole humanity, to all human local societies. According to Schmitt one who possesses a real power can decide what content the words and concepts will have: Caesar dominus et supra grammaticam.

“The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism. Here one is reminded of a somewhat modified expression of Proudhon's: whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat. To confiscate the word humanity, to invoke and monopolize such a term probably has certain incalculable effects, such as denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be an outlaw of humanity; and a war can thereby be driven to the most extreme inhumanity” (Schmitt 54).

The book *Empire* of Negri and Hardt perhaps lacks political dimension because the authors claim that there is no imperialistic center. (See: Negri and Hardt, 2000). *Empire*, as Mouffe asserts, is no more than “an ultra-left version of the cosmopolitan perspective” (Mouffe, *On Political* 107). Simply, the reformers among the socialists just attempt to mediate, and to regulate the turbulences of the global capitalism for which they also see no alternative. Therefore, political philosophy that arises from this standpoint of the contemporary leftists is not grounded in the revolutionary consciousness anymore. Probably, they stopped reading Marx, and probably they had never read Hegel. Paradoxically, Schmitt as a conservative thinker nowadays is much more controversial and relevant for the socialistic problematization of the liberal political being. His thought gives a clear diagnose on the political reality which stops the historical movement, concluding in great philosophical manner:

“The political concept of battle in liberal thought becomes competition in the domain of economics and discussion in the intellectual realm. Instead of a clear distinction between the two different states, that of war and that of peace, there appears the dynamic of perpetual competition and perpetual discussion. The state turns into society: on the ethical-intellectual side into an ideological humanitarian conception of humanity, and on the other into an

economic-technical system of production and traffic. The self-understood will to repel the enemy in a given battle situation turns into a rationally constructed social ideal or program, a tendency or an economic calculation. A politically united people becomes, on the one hand, a culturally interested public, and, on the other, partially an industrial concern and its employers, partially a mass of consumers. At the intellectual pole, government and power turns into propaganda and mass manipulation, and at the economic pole, control” (Schmitt 71-72).

So, the question is how to transform the political conditions of the social? Or we are going to accept the end of history as rational liberation of revolutionary’s anxiety? Revolution implies a suspension of total democracy and its pseudo-universalism, because it’s a call to conserve the status quo. If we have democracy as an ultimate paradigm it is unlikely to have revolution, and vice versa, revolution assumes the condition of teleological suspension of democracy, namely, revolutionary consciousness is always directed towards transformation of the society through the political ontology. It assumes the political as a ground for the revolutionary consciousness formation. In reign of absolute democracy you are simply directed to accept the unequal distribution of the wealth as a given state without questioning its genealogy, and to accept the position of the repression of the poor into the system of the production dominated by the rich as a starting position. “Win win politics in which solutions could be found favoring everybody in society” (Mouffe, *On the Political* 32). The rich and the poor are just lifestyles; they’re equal abstract positions in a procedurally regulated dialogue. Liberty and equality of all as the ethico-political principles of liberals, as abstract principles, create equality as a trans-temporal and trans-anthropological essence in every human being despite his actual economical condition. Revolutionary must be convinced into the meaninglessness of struggle.

3.

Now I’ll try to conclude with capturing the inner phenomenology of revolutionary’s consciousness having in mind the very complex philosophical Kierkegaard’s description of the situation of Abraham. In the liberalism the dialectic is neglected, and the movement is abolished. Acceptance of the movement is crucial for the revolutionary, but it brings anxiety to him due to the nature of the transformation of reality, but also because of the leap into the unknown that must be done. But in the same time, every revolutionary has this total democratic utopia as a kind of temptation, and I have in mind, the discourse that Kierkegaard uses to describe the situation of Abraham. Revolutionary is Abraham in the context of liberal democracy. For instance, Abraham’s religious existence has ethical as a temptation, as a door to history and to historical revelation and salvation from the abyss of religious leap. Abraham could be saved from the horror of religious existence that could not be mediated in any circumstances. “The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is” (Kierkegaard 30). In analogy, revolutionary has to sacrifice the commodity of the world, and even more, the very world of realized happiness and final total

democracy which liberalists are speaking of. This total efficient democracy is the ultimate peace which puts an end to never-ending wars, and this is final ethical reality. Revolutionary has this contemporary context of total democracy as a temptation, which means that you have to accept the status quo contrary to your conditions as a revolutionary, and that is the temptation. Revolutionary must give up from the revolution, because it is a risk of differential otherness, it is an eschatological thinking. On the other hand, this post-political perspective and the total democracy as a state of ultimate abolition of the time provides revelation from the existential revolutionary horror. *“Every movement of infinity is carried out through passion, and no reflection can produce a movement. This is the continual leap in existence that explains the movement”* (Kierkegaard 42). Revolutionary must reject his existence to accept the liberalism and for Kierkegaard “the deeper natures never forget themselves and never become anything other than what they were” and the revolutionary have to “recollect everything, but this recollection is precisely the pain, and yet in infinite resignation he is reconciled with existence” (Kierkegaard 43). But why is the temptation so strong? The next paragraph will deeply explain the reason for the anxiety.

“The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *telos* [end, purpose] but is itself the *telos* for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further. The single individual, sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy, is the individual who has his *telos* in the universal, and it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal. As soon as the single individual asserts himself in his singularity before the universal, he sins, and only by acknowledging this can he be reconciled again with the universal. Every time the single individual, after having entered the universal, feels an impulse to assert himself as the single individual, he is in a spiritual trial [*Anfoegtelse*], from which he can work himself only by repentantly surrendering as the single individual in the universal” (Kierkegaard 54).

Kierkegaard is speaking about the religious existence, but this could be applied to the revolutionary existence. The ethical is the goal for everything because it is universal, and when the thing is absorbed into the ethical it cannot go any further. Revolutionary experienced the new situation of liberal reality by “repentantly surrendering as the single individual in the universal.” That’s the temptation that liberates him from the anxiety of choice and unfinished reality. In liberalism we just became individuals due to the new political reality. Individualism is the universalism; an abstract concept applicable to everyone. It is produced by the end of history and it produces the continuation of that reality. Existence is something unfinished and produces itself into time as a singularity that cannot be derived from any social relation, neither from any universalism. “The ethical is of the same nature as a person's eternal salvation, which is his *telos* forevermore and at all times, since it would be a contradiction for this to be capable of being surrendered (that is, teleologically suspended), because as soon as this is suspended it is relinquished, whereas that which is

suspended is not relinquished but is preserved in the higher, which is its *telos* (Kierkegaard⁵⁴).

Contemporary leftists slide to liberalism and its total state, to its conservatism, through the acceptance of current stage of capitalism because they have stopped to see meaning in the uncertain revolutionary action. They accepted the concept of total state or annul of the political pluralism. Their consciousness is caught up into the game movement “between ethics (intellectuality) and economics (trade),” and “from this polarity they attempt to annihilate the political as a domain of conquering power and repression. The concept of private law serves as a lever and the notion of private property forms the center of the globe, whose poles ethics and economics are only the contrasting emissions from this central point” (Schmitt 71).

Mouffe and Laclau accept the enlargement of the political domain with some social issues but they stay consistent within their philosophy of agonism as a new social strategy towards radical democratic politics and transformation. (See: Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). The aim of agonistic perspectives is “a profound transformation of the existing power relations and the establishment of a new hegemony. Therefore, it can be properly called radical” (Mouffe, *On the Political* 52). Considering the Kierkegaardian perspective, it seems to me that this radicalization of the democracy is not its suspension; it’s not revolutionary potential, but it’s its continuation, because it will be returned to the dominant liberalistic discourse as its periphery. After all, according to Mouffe, we must realize that, with modern democracy, we are dealing with a new political form of society whose specificity comes from the articulation between two different traditions. “On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty. There is no necessary relation between those two distinct traditions but only a contingent historical articulation”(Mouffe, *The Democratic paradox* 2, 3).

Leftists become the most conservative thinkers, simply because they repulse the anxiety of their existence. In order to become a father of faith Abraham needed to resist the temptation of the ethical. Revolutionary, in the same way, will have to suspend democracy teleologically, in order to reinvent and reinvest the concept of power. But probably the revolution is one obsolete and redundant idea, even for the revolutionaries. The liberal democracy has no further proceedings into another form of state, so the revolutionary who accepts this condition cannot go any further. In the reality of total democracy as an optimal condition, revolutionary consciousness is the last crisis stronghold and just one irrational and politically irrelevant act of the last exhausted avant-garde of European legacy. *Rage against the machine* are so wrong, revolution is already dead because we’ve killed the revolutionary!

Bibliography

- Beck, Ulrich. *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Beyond left and Right*. Cambridge: Polity, 1994.
- Giddens, Anthony. *The Third Way*. Cambridge: Polity, 1998.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London and New York: Verso, 2014.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Mouffe, Chantal. *On the Political*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Mouffe, Chantal. *The Democratic paradox*. London and New York: Verso, 2000.
- Mouffe, Chantal. *The Return of the Political*. London and New York: Verso, 1993.
- Negri, Antonio, and Michael Hardt. *Empire*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Democracy and revolution: An Essay on Temptation and Anxiety (Abstract)

Author examines the question: Is revolutionary consciousness possible in the context of globalization and universalization of the liberal democracy as one universal rational consensus? According to Mouffe we could maintain that liberalism is an attempt for abolition of the political, through its tendency to reduce itself to a liberal critic of the political and to endless procedures. Contemporary liberal thinkers are arguing about new concepts which, in paradoxical way, gain their trans-temporality historically leading to a concept of total state; concepts such as: substitution of the classes with life-styles, de-traditionalization and de-philosophication of the political, neutralization of the state, abolition of the gap between the state and the society. Radical leftists accepted the pluralism and the liberal democratic institutions, so there is no conviction in historical necessity of radical transformation, only acceptance of the end of the history. Therefore, political philosophy is possible only as a regulation of the turbulences of the capitalism for which they see no alternative. Paradoxically, they became the best students of Fukuyama's conservatism. In the reality of total democracy as an optimal condition, revolutionary consciousness is the last crisis stronghold and just one irrational and politically irrelevant act. Every revolutionary existence is in Abraham's state of anxiety to choose to accept this temptation of the end of history as its ethical liberation or to suspend the democracy just to obtain its inner prerogatives.

Keywords: the political, liberalism, democracy, Mouffe, revolutionary consciousness, Kierkegaard, anxiety.