

Hermeneutic Communism: An Interview with Santiago Zabala

Michael Marder: Could you summarize the main contributions of your new book, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (Columbia UP, 2011), co-authored with Gianni Vattimo, to contemporary political philosophy?

Santiago Zabala: Well, as the subtitle indicates, we do not demand a return to Marx, as so many philosophers do today, but rather the retrieval of his thought through Heidegger, or, better, through hermeneutics. The problem with contemporary political philosophy is bound to the prejudice people hold toward Heidegger's, Nietzsche's, and Gadamer's political sympathies and choices. While one of them clearly made an error, the others were quite conservative and in some cases excessively manipulated by their readers. Although some believe this is enough to discredit their philosophies altogether (and they are wrong), others moved beyond this (as some did with Hume's racism against the blacks or Frege's anti-Semitism) in order to learn from their philosophical intuitions. Regardless of the fact that these authors were politically conservative, their philosophies should not be discredited, because they represent one of the most productive theoretical possibilities of emancipation from the constraints our metaphysical world. If Nietzsche unmasked metaphysics and Heidegger destroyed it, Gadamer went on to indicate the different possibilities opened by thought without truth, that is, of hermeneutics. While this is in part true, especially before Heidegger's ontological revolution, philosophy of interpretation has become a common language for all those interested in overcoming the old frames of political action, given the effective change in reality interpretation involves. This is something missing from other political philosophical positions. Instead of a philological assessment of the tradition, hermeneutics is an ontology of the event where thought welcomes changes, difference, or emergencies. If hermeneutics is capable of bringing about effective changes, it is not because its theoretical foundations are truer than other ideological positions, but, rather, because it does not have any foundation or power. Hermeneutical justification lies in its being a discredited or weak position, that is, one that belongs to the "losers of history," to use Benjamin's terminology. Interpretation inevitably involves a change in the condition in which it takes place, a change that implies that the interpreter does not find herself at ease and demands a modification of the reality in which she finds herself. In this way, the

hermeneutical contribution to contemporary political philosophy is disturbing, unsettling, and also alarming, since it tries to modify the established political condition, the status quo, or what Heidegger called the “lack of emergency.” Having said this, communism becomes the appropriate political and economic program of hermeneutics since it is also a discredited position, which is missing from the establishment: it still “haunts” us, as so many capitalists still say today. The point is not only to be on the side of the losers of history or to promote those weak and marginalized masses of society but also to understand that, philosophically and politically, it is impossible to represent them by means of true or established theories since these theories already belong to the winners. While some contemporary philosophers, such as Negri or Badiou, also promote a return to communism, they do this from a metaphysical perspective, which will inevitably exclude the weak. In order to philosophize in favor of the weak, philosophy and politics must themselves occupy weak positions, where the interpretative constitution of the human being is acknowledged not only ontologically, but also ontically. Our book aims to provide contemporary political theories with a philosophical (hermeneutical) and a political-economic (communist) perspective in favor of those weak, discarded, and marginalized masses of people living in the slums, that is, on the margins of capitalism.

Michael Marder: So, it seems that the striking contribution you and Gianni Vattimo make to contemporary political philosophy is an attempt at thinking politics without power (what you call “the perspective of the weak”). What would you respond to those who consider such politics either utopian or anarchist, or, indeed, a combination of the two? And do a thinking and action re-imagined and undertaken from the standpoint of the weak necessarily have to be *reactive*, negatively critical, filled with what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*?

Santiago Zabala: While we agree that politics without power or violence is almost impossible because of the impossibility to overcome metaphysics once and for all, it is necessary to promote a philosophy that at least is aware of the political consequences of metaphysics. This is why hermeneutics is so important for politics. It is a postmetaphysical position determined to weaken power. But it is also very crucial to remember that metaphysical politics does not impose power in order to dominate, but rather is functional for the existence of a society of dominion, that is, of our framed democracies. The anarchist component that you mention is not only constituent of hermeneutic communism, but also promoted in order to avoid framed democracies’ policies, which, as we all know today, are meant to conserve the economic crisis, impose exaggerated security measures, and ignore the ongoing ecological disaster we are falling into. The utopian feature is different: hermeneutic communism does not imagine how politics could be, but rather suggests following South American contemporary politics.

This is why our last section is entitled *Chavez: A Model for Obama?* We believe he is a model that Obama could follow given the Venezuelan social, economic, and educational politics in favor of the weak. While it's true the U.S. and Venezuelan realities are very different, the fact that it's easier to get health care in Caracas than in Washington should make all of us reconsider the view we have of these South American democracies. As far as the *ressentiment* of the weak, I would say it depends where they are, which weak are we talking about? Those in South America are now being financed and taken care of by their governments (another example is Lula, who pulled millions of families out of extreme poverty and elevated them to Brazil's middle class), while in the United States poverty is increasing at alarming rates. In this condition, it's the U.S. weak who are now full of *ressentiment* (the Occupy Movement is an example), while the South American ones are beginning to live without it.

Michael Marder: How does your book respond to the traditional framing of the political within metaphysical paradigms? What is the vision of “politics after metaphysics” from the standpoint of hermeneutic communism?

Santiago Zabala: Our book does not respond by pointing out that this metaphysical frame is wrong, but rather by showing that it is unjust. Politics after metaphysics does not imply a solution or an emancipatory program; rather, it implies the awareness that this same logic (of emancipation) is bound to fall again into metaphysics. This is where Heidegger comes in handy: he did not require philosophy to correct our metaphysical tradition—only to recognize how “metaphysical” it was. If we think of postmetaphysical procedures such as “deconstruction,” “demystification,” or “weakening” (which all depend, more or less, on Heidegger's destruction), we can note how they still work within this tradition. Having said this, hermeneutic communism overcomes the Hegelian moment of reconciliation in favor of a history of events, i.e., of the “emergencies” that disturb the frames of democracy. It is difficult to favor democratic procedures today when parties or candidates worldwide must first acquire the financial support from corporations or endorsements from the United Nations or the U.S. president. The response to this framing should not be an “alternative” but rather an “alteration” of the system in order to reorient our policies toward the weak.

Michael Marder: Do you see hermeneutic communism as actually more democratic than the contemporary formal and nominal democracies?

Santiago Zabala: Yes. Is it possible in our framed democracies to vote for someone who obtained the same education as the majority of the population of his nation or who is of their own ethnic race? Sure, Obama is the first black president, but did he behave differently from his predecessors? Coming from Italy (which is not the best example), where there are several U.S. military bases, the military

freedom that South American nations achieved from NATO or the U.S. bases is amazing.

Michael Marder: Does communism need hermeneutics to rid it of the metaphysical legacy it has inherited from past political thought?

Santiago Zabala: Yes, it does, but what is more important is what brings them together: the end of metaphysics. The issue here (and this goes for all politics that wish to become postmetaphysical) is: What are the philosophical and political (or economic) positions that fail or become dysfunctional within the metaphysical structures of production and rationality? While communism failed once it started to compete with capitalism within the latter's model for development, the interpretative nature of truth in hermeneutics always spoiled any hopes for a systematic philosophical position. Both of these "failed" and "spoiled" positions represent all those who have neither won nor learned to function within the metaphysical structures of politics. These margins today represent the majority of the world's population, living in the slums as the "discharges" of capitalism.

Michael Marder: Two related questions. First, are all failures worth pursuing as promising, weak positions? Perhaps, the very term "failure" is still too metaphysically tainted to become theoretically useful, since it is usually taken as nothing but the underside of success, a temporary setback in the inexorable actualization of potentialities. Second, what about the rather conservative desires of those you group under the heading of the "weak," or in classical Marxist terms, their false consciousness? A vast majority of the people living in the favelas of Rio watch soap operas, admiring their rich and successful protagonists...

Santiago Zabala: No, not all failures are weak; when I refer to the weak, I have in mind those on the margins of capitalism, democracy, or NATO. These are all living in the slums of great cities and more generally in the south. Their "failure" is bound to their incapacities or unwillingness to function within framed democracies. The issue today is that these weak are already three-quarters of the world population. In Caracas, before Chavez was elected, the slums did not even appear on the maps of the city—they were portrayed as green zones. Either way, is it really necessary to indicate who is weak and who isn't today? I believe it is pretty clear both in Montreal and Naples: Who is at the margins of society; who is weak. Regarding the "false consciousness": the fact that in the favelas they continue to vote for Lula (and now Dilma) regardless of the latest episode of *Dr. House* or news from CNN demonstrates that there is a limit to the media manipulation. At least in these nations there are many networks, such as *TeleSur*, which are determined to compete with these shows.

Michael Marder: How would hermeneutic communism respond to the current global economic and political crisis?

Santiago Zabala: The response can be found in the political programs of the democratically elected governments of Chavez, Morales, and other socialist politicians in South America. These nations have managed to quit the IMF, which is supposed to be the most rational economic institution in the world, holding the promise to control and save economies from crisis. In the second section (*Conserving Financial Recessions*) of chapter two (*Armed Capitalism*) we show, following economists such as Stiglitz, Krugman, and others, how this same institution is actually determined to conserve the capitalist logic of profit regardless of its consequences for the majority of the world's population. Hermeneutic communism, on the contrary, follows different economic institutions, such as the Banco del Sur, which have not only managed to escape (although not entirely) the consequence of the Western financial crisis but have also provided the West with a model to follow.

Michael Marder: I see that you are highlighting the communist part of the response. Could you also talk about its hermeneutical aspects?

Santiago Zabala: The hermeneutical aspects can be found in the alteration these economic and political realities involve. The different interpretation that hermeneutics requires from each of us is directed against the powerful imposition of truth or, in this case, the Washington consensus. As an anarchic position, hermeneutics gives a shock to the established system, becomes dangerous for the latter. As we've seen, the danger does not lie in the "emergency" but rather in the "lack of emergency." As Vattimo said in one of his latest essays ("The Political Outcome of Hermeneutics"): "Whoever does not succeed in becoming an autonomous 'interpreter,' in this sense, perishes; he or she no longer lives like a person but like a number, a statistical item in the system of production and consumption."