It's time for philosophy to return to the city

DONATELLA DI CESARE

SECOND

Gillian Rose Memorial Lecture

Supported by the Tom Vaswani Education Family Trust

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Kingston University London

CRMEP BOOKS

Generously supported by the
Tom Vaswani Education Family Trust

Published in 2022 by
CRMEP Books
Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy
Penrhyn Road campus, Kingston University,
Kingston upon Thames, KT1 2EE, London, UK
www.kingston.ac.uk/crmep

ISBN 978-1-7391451-0-1 (pbk)
ISBN 978-1-7391451-1-8 (ebook)

Designed and typeset in Walbaum by illuminati, Grosmont
Printed by Impress Print Services Ltd, Hersham

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

It's time for philosophy to return to the city

It is a great honour and a great joy finally to be able to give this, the second Gillian Rose Memorial Lecture, which twice had to be postponed because of the pandemic. It is an honour because of the link of this lecture to the name of Gillian Rose. She was a woman of great sensibility, a profound philosopher, and a model today not only for her unmistakeable tone, but also for the originality of her existential and political approach to philosophy.

1

What role can philosophy play in this world without an outside? To ask this question is to interrogate the fate and role of philosophy in the era of advanced capitalism. As Socrates tells us, as Hannah Arendt tells us, thinking alienates: it makes us foreigners.

What borders does thought have, if it is gripped by the fear of a step into the outside; if everywhere a diffuse exophobia dominates, the fear and horror of what is outside? The world in which we live is the claustrophobic space in

which we oscillate between imminent planetary collapse and the non-event of the comings and goings of liberal democracy. This is the closed world of a preventive policing operation, where we try to exorcize every alteration of the new. How is it even possible to imagine an alternative? Every attempt to take some distance is passed off as a vain impossibility. Every hotbed of resistance in the imagination seems exhausted.

This is all the more true now that existence is condemned to the imperative of the day — to the tireless torpor of protracted alarm, to the inexhaustible half-sleep that knows no night. There reigns here a lack of sensitivity, a privation of memory, a difficulty in reflecting.

2

In a globe without an outside, philosophy — which is a thinking-beyond, a vocation for the beyond — appears dangerously out of place. It is no accident that philosophy today is faced with two temptations: either to close in on itself, abstracting itself completely from the world, in a hyper-academic philosophy, or to get rid of itself, becoming something else altogether, the philosophy that imitates the technoscientific disciplines.

I believe that it is instead time for philosophy to return to the city. In saying this I realize that I am touching on a subject that is weighed down by a taboo, a centuries-old ban that has lasted, I dare say, from Socrates to

the calamities of the twentieth century — and here I am thinking of Heidegger. And yet philosophy must be called back to its political vocation. And by this I mean a reciprocal reference, whereby philosophy is not only inspired by *pólis*, but aspires to the *pólis*. Philosophy is thus urged to make its return, without ever forgetting that it is — all the more so when it is in the city — out of place and against time.

I will end by pointing in two directions for this return to proceed: that of a radical existentialism and that of a new anarchism.

3

We know that philosophy has always been a subversive threat to the city, as long as we have any trace of its existence. That was already true with Thales and Heraclitus, but Socrates is the emblem of this. The Greek epithet coined for him is *átopos* — without place, or, rather, out of place. Atopia is the characteristic of one who provokes bewilderment in others. Socrates is extravagant, extraordinary, extraneous — out of place. He lives with others, but he does not live like others. He looks like a stateless person, an expatriate in his homeland. As a foreigner he crosses the *pólis*, each time with his alienating gaze.

His atopia is a heterotopia, not simply out of place, but also an allusion to another place. If Socrates dwells in the city, at the same time his thought pushes outside of it, trying to decentre the order of the *pólis*, which is too closed,

asphyxial, homologated. This is why he thinks alone, but also with others. Can dialogue change the future of Athens?

Some of his fellow citizens run away when they see him approaching at a distance — for whoever gets trapped in discussion with him is lost. Others consider him a time-waster, lampoon him, scorn, deride and insult him. Whatever have the Athenians done wrong to deserve such a nonsense-merchant? This madman goes around polemicizing over pointless questions, flipping discussions around and turning words on their heads. Between one trick and another he puts the most commonplace ideas into doubt, recognizes no authority and even mocks the sovereign *démos*. After posing a long string of problems, he does not resolve even one of them; rather, he is content just to show others that they *do not know*. And what kind of person would like to hear themselves being called ignorant — not least in the public square? Many are resentful — have had more than their fill.

With Socrates, Western philosophy discovered its political vocation. With his questions, he does not aim to achieve any kind of consensus. Rather, he seeks to spark discord even within the soul of others, and thus in the city. He sees this as the linchpin of democracy. Can dialogue change the future of Athens? His defeat is a given. For this 'prophet' of thought, who looks to a just city, there is no escape, no salvation. With his trial and his death sentence, an abyss opens up between philosophy and politics.

4

Plato describes not only the trial of Socrates, but also his last moments. Nietzsche refers, in this regard, to a kind of revenge. For Plato transforms his death, makes it immortal, turns a defeat into a victory.

Refusing to flee, Socrates remains an Athenian citizen to the last. But in the moment of his death he becomes a witness to another order, an extra-political city of memory. Already strangers to the city, philosophers become foreigners everywhere in the world. Nor have they ever been able to forget the death of Socrates. In their exile this appalling scandal would serve as the constant warning of a latent conflict with the city, one that has temporarily calmed but only by being pitched into the future.

Socrates' execution represented a definitive caesura. Nothing would be the same again. For philosophers, life in the city had now become too dangerous. Many chose exile, including Plato. He left Athens for the shores of Syracuse in a first tumultuous voyage, marked by many misadventures. But then he returned from Sicily and acquired a piece of land to the north-west of Athens's city walls, and founded a new school there, the Academy. No more disdain, no more derision — no more death. Philosophical thought, that misunderstood ecstasy, was no longer to be expounded in the public square.

Adequate protection was needed. But it was not even remotely conceivable that the philosophers could abandon

the city entirely. Plato imagined an internal retreat, a refuge for ideas, a shelter for philosophers. This was Plato's great intuition when he founded the Athenian Academy. Though defeated, the philosophers did not submit to exile. Following Socrates' teaching, they returned — but they brought their exile back within the *pólis*.

Philosophy's subversive activity was institutionalized in the Academy. What a humiliation for the *pólis* this was! For roaming around within its walls were these strange, eccentric individuals who lived in the city as if they were elsewhere, who resided there as foreigners. They were witnesses to another, better city: citizens of the Allopolis now established within the *pólis*.

In the garden of the Academy — neither *agorá* nor courthouse nor market — the philosophers were free to migrate in the skies of ideas. Certainly, in that theoretical exile it was meagre satisfaction to acknowledge that democracy had itself failed. The city was collapsing.

Born of Socrates' death, philosophy was thus the daughter of political defeat. But the Acropolis of thought managed to resist, for centuries and millennia. Thus, *philosophía* turned out to be the name for the capacity for exile. And philosophers, these melancholy witnesses, these sublime migrants of thought, knew how to convert this irreparable defeat into a conquest to come.

5

The discord between the philosopher and the community is radical. It has endured over the centuries. On many past occasions this hidden tension ultimately concluded in overt persecution. How can we forget the flames in which Giordano Bruno was burned alive on Rome's Campo de' Fiori on 17 February 1600 — another dramatic, mournful scene? Bringing to mind the death of Socrates, it provides a modern, even crueller version of the insuperable tension between the philosopher and the community.

This explains why, despite everything, philosophy has never lost its original disruptive charge, its critical potential. The resistance it puts up to reality springs from its own atopia. Nothing escapes its vigilant gaze, which sifts through not only traditions but also that which has become so obvious as to seem natural, immutable, eternal. This is why its proper dimension is the dimension of critique. To critique does not mean to cavil or condemn. Rather, it is that theoretical and practical commitment which never accepts anything without reflection.

6

But what happened in the twentieth century? The twentieth century represents one of philosophy's high points. It is characterized by an unprecedented radicality, expressed in the acute, sometimes inflamed critique of reason and in the attempt to deconstruct the Western

tradition. The break from the past marks a watershed in the stream of thought.

The extreme radicality of twentieth-century philosophy is also to be explained in the light of the catastrophic events that marked the century: the two world wars, the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Reflection on modernity took its cue not only from the unprecedented innovation of an extraordinary scientific progress, from the explosive results achieved by technology, but also from incomparable processes of destruction and self-destruction. Philosophy was profoundly shaken, lacerated by all this. It became a critical voice — but no longer in the name of Reason. Its target, rather, was the technological rationality of the Western world. Philosophy felt the weight of this responsibility. After 1945 it was impossible still to conceive of any kind of innocent neutrality. Whereas soldiers, politicians and scientists tried to exonerate themselves or escape scrutiny, most philosophers declared their own guilt. But to admit the crime of thought did not mean succeeding in thinking the crime itself.

The 'Heidegger case' is emblematic in this regard. The greater the distance, the clearer the symbolic importance of this Stalingrad of philosophy, which extends beyond the figure of Heidegger and his thought. Since the first German publication of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* in 2014 the question has been more sharply posed, but it also has become clearer. The tension

between philosophy and politics has re-emerged in the most exasperated terms.

But can it be said that with Heidegger philosophy returned to the city? Not really. Rather, philosophy became subordinate, through an ill-advised pact with Nazism. Philosophy did not enter the city but allowed politics to — violently — break into the university lecture theatres. To summarize Heidegger's error we can speak of a political territorialization of atopia. This is especially contradictory considering that Heidegger is the philosopher of homelessness. This does not wipe away the anarchitectures of his thought.

One cannot, however, limit the question to the dangers of political activism, which, after all, seduced more than one philosopher over the course of the last century. It would be short-sighted not to perceive effects of the 'Heidegger case' on our contemporary panorama. What is more: we cannot understand the contemporary panorama if we do not first shed some light on the 'Heidegger case'.

7

Was Heidegger like Plato? The short-circuit was provided by his own direct pupils: both Arendt and Gadamer spoke of a 'return from Syracuse'. The popular-liberal stereotype of the philosopher incompetent in matters of politics was destined for great success. Concealed within the foundations of

this stereotype was an unedifying conception not only of philosophy but also of politics: the former abstract, rigid, characterized by a 'tyrannical' trait; the latter concrete and simple, resistant to ideas and ideals. It would, then, be appropriate, indeed necessary, to establish a separation between them.

It should be added that neither Arendt nor Gadamer complied with this obligation; they were both, in different forms, exponents of a new tendency which has taken root since the immediate postwar period: the bid to democratize democracy.

That is why, even when retrospectively evaluating the events of recent decades, the image of Syracuse ought to be rebuffed. Not only does it banalize the 'Heidegger case', but it suggests that philosophy — having openly declared its own incompetence — should stay out of politics or, at most, run along behind in an ancillary role. If the philosopher may make mistakes in their choice of active politics, the question here is not limited to their supposed amateurish incapacity.

And instead of what happened in the case of Heidegger, a lesson for the present and future has been more or less tacitly drawn. After that ignominious defeat — perhaps the most burning of setbacks — philosophy seems destined to remain within academic confines, outside of politics, at most adapting itself to a role as the functionary or, better, the press officer for democracy.

8

In recent times a philosophy of a normative stamp has been doing the rounds. Far from the radicality of twentieth-century thought, this philosophy openly declares itself a handmaiden not only of science but also of politics — or, better, of economics.

If we had to summarize what has happened, we could say that philosophy has returned to the city sorrowfully, with ashes upon its head, above all after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Born to Arendt in the era of McCarthyism, the dubious 'two totalitarianisms' thesis has rapidly become a conceptual blockage. As well as forbidding any in-depth reflection on the peculiarities of either Stalinism's or Nazism's political projects, it has also offered an alibi for not thinking. The label 'totalitarianism' marks the limit beyond which one may not legitimately venture; it holds up the sign of prohibition which discredits any alternative in advance and represents a perennial admonition.

Mindful of its recent past, philosophy can move, and does move, only on this side of that line. Here, it has a negative mandate, that of exercising some critique, nurturing a few doubts, and denouncing a few abuses. It also has an outwardly positive role, namely its commitment in defence of present-day democracy, such as it is. This new condition for philosophy, promoted to a handmaiden of democracy, is explicated in extreme fashion in Richard Rorty's essay 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy'.

On the one hand, philosophy takes a backward step: seeking to absolve itself, it almost dissolves itself, condemning itself to irrelevance. On the other hand, democracy becomes synonymous with public discussion. I am thinking here of the emblematic case of Habermas, for whom political action derives from a more foundational principle of discourse, able to promote consensus. We know the story that follows: that philosophy has done no more than ratify, or every now and then rectify, an increasingly empty and formal democracy.

This is, moreover, in line with politics understood as administrative governance. And this is the striking thing: on the one hand, we have an ancillary philosophy; on the other, a politics without vision, reduced to mere administration. It is as if these were two sides of the same coin. The philosopher has agreed not to pose too many questions, least of all the fundamental ones, because any alternative would be stigmatized. The philosopher thus ends up pandering to the state dimension of a politics that does not think, but limits itself to administration. Hence the paradox: even as philosophy proclaims its return to the city, it effectively denies it.

9

Is there a way to re-enter the city, while still preserving the extraneous, the eccentric, the atopic? One figure who opens a passageway is Walter Benjamin. An esoteric author, an anarchic communist, an obsessive

collector, a freelance intellectual, Benjamin ventures out into the metropolitan city and ends up in its one-way streets. But, most importantly, he travels down its tree-lined boulevards, its labyrinthine alleyways, penetrating its inner passageways, its commercial arcades, the fatherland of commodities, the 'fairy-tale castles' of advanced capitalism.

The philosopher comes back into the city in order to interrupt a state of apparent wakefulness which in fact conceals a catastrophic sleepwalking. But for Benjamin this is not a reawakening to Reason — an accomplice of the virulent myth of progress. Critique is not enough to implode the capitalist phantasmagoria; there also needs to be an awakening to the dreams, to the dialectical speculativity of the beyond, to the posthumous redemption of life. This is the warning we receive from Benjamin, who, like a psychoanalyst of the collective consciousness, enclosed in the city, makes his way through its passages trying to recall and revive the dreams of past generations, summoning them back into memory. Those who have dreamed have not done so in vain; those who now dream can re-dream these dreams. Benjamin does not shy away from the fact that his journey is also spectral, for travelling far and wide he may also be followed by troubled shadows, unredeemed souls, phantasms of defeat.

Benjamin thus shows how philosophy can maintain its atopic trait even as it criss-crosses the city, everywhere inscribing the atopia of another city as it passes through the galleries and alleyways, the parks and basements.

The philosopher saves the tradition of the oppressed, redeems the memory of the dead. And he achieves some little victories. But there is here no philosopher-king, no sovereignty. Benjamin does not purport to observe from on high, to raise himself up above — he has no bird's eye view. He wanders around the city like a fallen angel; he still has his wings — however broken — and the memory of a dream of justice. Politically, he is an asylum seeker in his own city. An eccentric inhabitant, conscious of his extraneousness, he resides among refugees and immigrants, shoulder to shoulder with the victims of overbearing financial wealth, among the beggars, the nomads, the unemployed and the desperate, the residue of the 'world of dreams' that has produced horrendous nightmares. He could be their storyteller. But he is only a *Lumpensammler*, a ragpicker. In this non-belonging, this non-citizenship, he never tires of pointing to the outside, of indicating the beyond. But he is running out of breath and catastrophe is imminent. He aspires, but he will not manage to conspire.

10

Three Greek words characterize the path I have tried to travel in my recent works, following the two trajectories of existence and politics: *atopia*, *uchronia* and *anarchia*.

Why a radical existentialism? We cannot avoid asking ourselves about existence in a world without an outside. It is to be assumed that this will have wider repercussions

— especially considering that 'existence' means to come outside, to emerge. The prefix indicates both the exit and the ecstatic opening.

Existence and philosophy are linked by their atopic character. That is why philosophy must respond to what happens to existence today. On the other hand, as Gillian Rose teaches us, there is no philosophy that is not a philosophy of existence. Thus for philosophy to take care of existence and of its fate means to recall its own atopia.

This would mean proposing a radical existentialism which recalls existence to its own eccentricity and demands an exophilia. Everyone survives day by day, cautious and folded in on themselves — existence is, more, a disconsolate in-sistence. For the self, living in the formless space of hyper-communication and hyper-consumption, the other has lost the aura of the foreigner and is only the immigrant, the 'illegal'. The other is just a burden and, on closer inspection, only the burden of one's own existence, reduced to an insistence on the self. In this zone of post-immunitarian indifference, of bulimic voracity, there can be no hospitality. Repression has mutated into depression. This self is not the old individualist of the modern era. Rather, it is an ego which has narcissistically sunk into itself. In its sterile resonance chamber this ego lives sheltered from any extraneousness, invulnerable to any troubling homelessness.

But without *philía* there is no *pólis*; without friendship there is no city. Restoring wonder, provoking disconcertment, arousing strangeness and instilling passion for the other — this is what philosophy can do.

II

Much could be said about the word 'anarchy', whose current meaning, although tempered by nostalgic overtones, remains pejorative. It is taken as the negation of principle and command, but even more often as the absence of government and therefore as disorder. Sovereignty is thus legitimized as the only condition for order, the sole alternative to the crippling absence of government. But the dichotomy between inside and outside, order and chaos, sovereignty and anarchy, which runs through modernity, appears more and more artificial. New phenomena, such as global migrations or new revolts, allow a glimpse of what is happening on the outside and reveal the limits of a politics anchored on state borders, unable to see beyond them.

However, it is possible to redeem the word 'anarchy' only through an anarchic archaeology which defuses, disempowers and deconstructs the *arché*, which cannot but unearth the alliance of power between principle and command. After all, why should the first be the leader? And why should the ruler be the first?

I speak of a 'new anarchism' because it is indispensable to deconstruct classical anarchism, that child of

modernity. It remains caught within its metaphysical limits. Hence the naivety, the illusions, the mistakes. This emerges in the vision of the individual who faces power, is struggling in the dilemma of seizing it once and for all but without allowing him- or herself to be taken possession of. This failure is all the more serious because anarchy, understood as the auto-negation of power, should have opened up a new political space.

Is it possible to save 'anarchy' from anarchism? And how? In recent decades an anarchic vein in philosophy has emerged. This is not surprising given that Continental thought not only questions every *arché*, but takes leave also of the archic act. This is so in the case of the modern subject, that sovereign who, sure of founding itself in its autonomy, has promoted itself to hinge of the universe.

A prominent place is occupied by Reiner Schürmann and by his 'principle of anarchy', an anarchic principle which, by destituting itself, prevents anarchy from becoming, in turn, a principle.

But, quickly leaving politics behind, Schürmann focuses attention on the deconstruction of metaphysics. For him the question is philosophical, or, better, ontological, since politics has always been archic, has always been configured around an *arché*. Here, however, an impasse looms against which Schürmann struggles without making any headway. If, in fact, political anarchy can only be reconsidered in the light

of ontological anarchy, the reverse is also true: ontological anarchy cannot but be translated into political anarchy.

A similar difficulty reappears in other philosophers who contribute to the anarchic deconstruction of every archaism — such as Derrida. In short, sharing an anarchic ontology is not yet the same thing as being anarchist. But the question cannot be closed abruptly. The relationship between philosophy and anarchism, which seems almost like a missed encounter, is ambiguous and complex. Should we really believe that the philosophical deconstruction of anarchism has nothing to do with the political tradition? I don't think so.

Philosophy pushes anarchism, in a sort of critical self-analysis, to recover its own repressed anarchic ontology. The political repercussions are profound. It will no longer be possible to replace one sovereignty with another, nor to understand power in a Manichaean way.

Perhaps the time has come for a new anarchism that works on the conceptual limits of a sclerotic legacy, that brings to light the petrified anarchy, preserves the privative alpha, denies and dismisses the established principle; an anarchism that looks beyond the frontiers of archic sovereignty and political architecture alike.

13 October 2021

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In today's crisis-ridden world of globalized capitalism it can seem harder than ever to find a way outside. Philosophy runs the risk of becoming the handmaiden of science and of a hollowed-out democracy. It is time for philosophy instead to return to the city, to the *pólis* from which it was banished after the death of Socrates, and to rediscover its ambiguous political potential. Critique and dissent are no longer enough. Mindful of a defeated exile and inner emigration, philosophers need new alliances and new visions. It is time, Donatella Di Cesare argues, to turn towards a radical existentialism and a new anarchism.

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