Book Review

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Simon Critchley begins and ends this concise and compelling book with snapshots of our current political landscape, connecting his account of political resistance to the concrete political situations that color our everyday Western world. What we’re missing, he claims, is a “motivating, empowering conception of ethics that can face and face down the drift of the present” [8], which is characterized by massive political disappointment. To this end, he grounds political action in the formation of an ethical subjectivity through commitment to the one-sided and unfulfillable demand of the Other, an experience of which provides the impetus and individual justification for action where a normative ethics has lost its appeal. His account of political resistance as the formation of localized alliances that challenge the coherence of the neo-liberal state, utilizing its language and laws in the endeavor, opens the possibility for anarchist – non-ontologically-based – political action directed at the all-encompassing neo-liberal system. This action occurs from a position within it yet at a distance from its apparatuses. In effect, what he offers is a fundamentally anarchist approach to political action that both begins in responsibility to Otherness and also uses non-violent means to enact change without ontological grounds on which to stand.

Critchley devotes more than half the book to the construction of an ethical subjectivity, beginning by rejecting what he calls the ‘autonomy orthodoxy’ of the West, where subjects (and in particular the capacity for reason with which they are endowed) are the sources
of their own moral authority. For him, the Western philosophical tradition is characterized by the attempt to work through the moment of inexplicability entailed by the Kantian question of facticity – the fact of reason, as the condition of possibility for morality, entails that the moral law will be universalizable (since humans are rational beings) yet is based in a subjective but ultimately inexplicable experience (awe at the ‘moral law within me’) – by locating an overarching autonomy elsewhere, whether in relations of intersubjectivity in Hegel or in the ‘life-practice of the proletariat’ in Marx. Critchley, however, is interested in this inexplicability as a strength and not a weakness to be mitigated.

What he proposes in response is an ethics based on the experience of the Other, where the experience of an alterity that always escapes my comprehension and the encounter with the face that “[exceeds] the idea of the other in me” [59] – borrowed from Lacan and Levinas, respectively – demands acknowledgement and thereby places an exorbitant demand upon me. This asymmetrical relation – the other person always stands above me – results in an ethics where, borrowing from Løgstrup, I act “for the sake of this living particular human being in front of me” [51]. It is this split in the subject “between itself and a demand that it cannot meet” [62] that acts as something like guilt or conscience and can impel someone to action. Yet in the same way that Kant’s categorical imperative demands that individual maxims be universalizable, Critchley claims that such action is justified only if universalizable [48], in the way that protest against discriminatory action can be universalized into a claim for equality, for instance. Ethical actions thus do not proceed according to universal laws, nor are they legislated by the subject alone. Rather, they begin with situational and heteronomous demands to which subjects commit themselves.
At the same time, Critchley emphasizes the fact that subjects are fundamentally ethical. The demand the self acknowledges and acts upon marks the self by splitting it, not only providing the motivation and justification for action but orienting it around a commitment. Selves are thus originally inauthentic and are constituted through such experiences; the split is a defining feature of subjects, affecting the subject’s relation to others in the future and itself articulated by past and present encounters with others. This ethics, Critchley claims, is anarchic in its lack of an overarching and governing principle. It is based upon the demand of the Other in a particular situation, along with my approval of such a demand.

In the final chapter of the book, Critchley turns to the question of political subjectivity, moving from an ‘ethics of infinitely demanding commitment’ to a ‘politics of resistance’. Where the experience of ethical subjectivity is the meta-political moment that motivates one to protest an injustice or right a wrong, politics is defined as “an ethical practice that arises in a situation of injustice which exerts a demand for responsibility” [92]. Yet where capitalism as a system continuously perpetuates itself and absorbs all opposing ideologies into itself, it turns out that an anarchist politics will also be required in addition to an anarchist ethics, one that doesn’t necessarily seek to abolish the vertical state structure but instead to disintegrate state power at localized points, through direct action. Pragmatically conceding that capitalism is probably here to stay, at least for a while, Critchley emphasizes the formation of localized and situated common fronts behind which disparate groups and individuals might temporarily come together for a common cause. The point of anarchist resistance – according to Critchley – should not necessarily be to replace the neo-liberal state with another form of government or non-government but to allow individuals to reoccupy and take control of the spaces in which they exist. Sovereignty and consensus is not the goal of political
action but rather the disincarnation or deformation of the existing state apparatus that empowers individuals – dissensus – possibly making use of the political and legal apparatuses that are already in place. “There is no transitivity between ontology and politics,” he writes [105].

One of the most interesting aspects of Critchley’s very interesting account is the role that language plays in the political process he describes, revealing much about that process. Where disempowered individuals are described (in a quote from Courtney Jung) as ‘disarticulated’, Critchley suggests the need for inventing new names – ‘indigenous’, etc. – around which individuals can aggregate to form a common front or a ‘political subject’ that will be the new position from which change is sought. Using a new name or political identity, subjects can (hopefully) reveal the contradictions inherent within the system – the withholding of indigenous rights where indigenous rights are to be legally recognized under international conventions, for instance. The political subject becomes ‘articulated’, which is to say recognized as having been displaced by the state, as being a legitimate subject under the state and as a political subject with a place from which to speak. This focus on inventing new names emphasizes the particularity of situations, which demand particular measures.

At the same time, however, his main examples all involve names that are already preexisting categories of some sort – ‘women’ or ‘indigenous’, for instance – acting as a reminder of the fact that we are nonetheless operating within a preexisting political system articulated in the language of neo-liberalism. To occupy and control space within the state, it may also be necessary to utilize the language and categories underlying the state. Yet the ‘new language of civil disobedience’ that he advocates also involves the use of outlandish and self-ridiculing spectacle by contemporary anarchist groups to
highlight the absurdity of their position within the system, for instance. This in turn highlights the staleness of the current political logic and language.

Critchley’s account is most compelling in its emphasis of the disruptive and disintegrative quality that political action must have within a capitalist state for it to be effective, which is to say, ‘not degenerate into ontology’. It must therefore work within the universalizing language and logic of the system for particular situations, even as particular situations call for particular demands, yet the process of disintegration must also continue on endlessly and repetitively, for new names too become old and stale. This necessity for repetition and continuous action is in fact a crucial element of Critchley’s form of anarchism, which Critchley might have underemphasized.

Of course, one might question the ability of groups and individuals to readily abandon old names and adopt new identities, which involves a process of abstraction that doesn’t necessarily coincide with the experience of oneself as a particular identity, even if it is often a useful political strategy. The fact that identities are historically constructed and contingent does not imply that they are arbitrary, placing in question the generalizability of the methods and tactics of resistance Critchley describes. Nonetheless, Critchley’s more fundamental point that politics must happen at a distance from the state while also being within it, along with his particular blend of anarchism that seeks to deform state power rather than abolish it are both pragmatic and insightful. The emphasis on responsibility – the commitment to an unfulfillable demand – over freedom in his account of an anarchist ethics is a highly compelling description of political resistance in our times.

In the Appendix, Critchley discusses the Bush administration, and in particular how it is in many ways an exemplary and highly
creative demonstration of ‘the political’, understood in the traditional Machiavellian, Hobbesian and even Schmittian sense. He shows us how depoliticizing this form of politics actually can be. Yet in the tone of his writing here, one can sense that it is not only the motivational deficit in contemporary society that has motivated this work but also the concrete political situation that is the Bush administration and its moralizing take on military capitalism, which present a particular demand via the many persons – the many Others – that have been wronged by the actions of this regime. It is these concrete and particular (yet universalizable) cases of injustice that make Critchley’s discussion particularly relevant.