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Four Notes for a Politics of Peace

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Abstract

In this short essay, I bring together five philosophers—Emmanuel Levinas, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Alphonso Lingis, and Jacques Rancière—who are not often addressed in concert. What I find holding these thinkers together is an underlying spatial configuration of political phenomena enacted in forms of relationality. Together these four “notes” constitute the seeds of a project for a phenomenological political theory of virtue and relationality.

I.

Peace suffers in political thought from being persistently conceived as a reaction, as an amelioration or ending of something else (viz., conflict or war). From such a perspective peace is presented as a fragile secondary condition of human nature, a mere effect of the serious business of social and political affairs. Peace is defined negatively in terms of an essential relationship with its inevitable failure to be. Peace is thereby conceived as a matter of *distance*: It is a distancing from conflict; it is a distant ideal. It best exerts itself when contact with otherness is limited, when it is at a distance. Conceived in distance, peace is wrought with impotence. As such, political theory tends to keep its distance from peace as a serious political concept.

Impotent peace is a symptom of an underlying condition of political thought that refuses to put human beings at the center of politics. To make peace impotent is to divest social virtue (and thereby human relations) from the political.

To rectify peace as a political concept requires reanimating virtue and relationality as both the material and the milieu of the political. In place of distance, peace can be thought on a model of proximity. To do so is to leave behind a view of peace as a point of consensus among competitors and replace it with peace as a project of dissensus in world held in common. Peace, then, can be seen as a condition and a force with a propensity to become. Emmanuel Levinas suggests as much in his view of the primacy of the face-to-face encounter:

It is necessary to ask oneself if peace, instead of being the result of the absorption of alterity [i.e., consensus], would not on the contrary be the *fraternal* mode of a proximity to the other (*autrui*), which would not simply be the failure to coincide with the other [i.e., dissensus] but would signify precisely the *surplus* of sociality over every solitude—the *surplus* of sociality and of love. We do not use this word, so often abused, lightly. (165)

A forceful concept of peace must locate the political among this surplus of sociality—a primordial commonness—and respecify relational virtues as political concepts. In light of the transformed conditions of relationality of contemporary life commonly referred to as globalization, we should also respecify proximity as a global concept.

In short, to arrive at proximity, we must distance ourselves from distance.

II.

The path to peace, as Antonio Negri claims, is an “exodus from the world as a collective construction of being” (60). This exodus is from the divided world of property to an indivisible world of the common. For Negri and Michael Hardt, “the common” is both the ecological framework of “the common wealth of the material world” and the socioeconomic framework of the “results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production” (*Commonwealth*, viii). Their altermodern project for a global, radical form of democracy is rooted in a constituent social power of the common that they call “the multitude.” The two-pronged notion of the common—as both common material world and common sociality—stands over and against property, partitioning, and competition as the dominant modes of ecological orientation and socioeconomic production. Hardt and Negri’s fundamental political concept for exploring the power of the common is *love*, taking Levinas one step further to include the environment. They define love as a form of biopolitical production of subjectivity through “encounters of singularities” that constitutes the common. Love is the creation of proximity: it is a force of openness, creativity, and collaboration that cannot be captured as private property. Love is both joy and an increase in common power. Love, it turns out, is the primary political concept holding together Hardt and Negri’s entire project. It is quite a departure to elevate a performative, intersubjective virtue like love to the focal point for a political philosophy—particularly in times characterized by crisis, inequality, violence, and uncontainable circulations

of power. To turn to love as the production of the common is to refuse a view of politics dissociated from sociality. It is to place power in what is common, rather than what is scarce.

The turn to love is also a refusal to view virtue as a private, rather than a common, affair. For Hardt and Negri, “Love means precisely that our expansive encounters and continuous collaborations brings us joy” (*Multitude*, 351). For them, the common is the condition for the possibility of both peace and democracy, realizable only as global concepts. The common is the surplus of sociality over and against a modern political concept of property on which competition and consensus (and thereby impotent peace) depend. And love is how it is made.

Hardt and Negri are quick to point out that “just like the common itself, love is deeply ambivalent and susceptible to corruption” (*Commonwealth*, 182). When corrupted, love is captured by the logics of property, consensus, and lack. Corrupted love seeks (en)closures of identity and sameness. In a corrupted common, like a corrupted love, difference and therefore peace becomes a weakness. Obstacles to love abound in the core concepts of modern political philosophy: identity, property, and a conception of freedom as that in need of protection (defense). These three concepts define the contemporary political constitution of individuals, families, corporations, institutions, and nations. In other words, political being is articulated in a reactive mode as a scarce and fragile commodity at risk of assault. Exodus from this world, then, requires transforming love from a closed system to an open one, from an orientation of individuals seeking sameness (consensus) to one of singularities expressing difference while existing in common (dissensus).

Love, then, needs to be cultivated and maintained. It too is arrived at via exodus—from the politics of identity, property, and consensus.

III.

What is the vehicle of exodus? Underlying love, and propelling it, is trust. Love is an embrace of freedom, and trust is how it is performed. Its performance is a performance of freedom. Its enactment is an enactment of proximity. Trust is a curious phenomenon in that it is itself self-propelling and self-expansive. To trust someone presupposes risk and danger and the possibility of betrayal. Trust is trust precisely because it is outside of knowledge. It is, perhaps, even *the* outside of knowledge. As Alphonso Lingis observes, “In trust one adheres to something one sees only partially or unclearly or understands only vaguely or ambiguously. One attaches to someone whose words or whose movements one does not understand, whose reasons or motives one does not see” (64). Trust is an exodus from fear to dwell in a joyous sense of commonness, of common being. Trust builds upon itself, generating more trust through its performance.

But trust too can be corrupted. Inequalities depend on corrupted trust, as do populisms and ideologies. When corrupted, as Lingis argues, trust morphs into hatred and fear (which also exhibit self-generated accelerations and enactment—and which also reside outside of knowledge). It should be clear that failures of trust do not themselves negate trust. Fear and hatred are not acts of exodus, but acts of refuge, producing refugees who cling to the desperate solitude of the war of all against all.

Taken as a political concept, trust explodes the friend-enemy distinction. Trust does not seek distinctions, but welcomes difference. The friend-enemy distinction transfers politics to images and the imagination, providing a residence for fear and hatred. It builds distances. Trust, however, breaks through representations to grasp the immediacy and proximity of the singularity of otherness, thus revealing the common.

IV.

The revelation of the common is ecstatic. In grasping the surplus of sociality and love, the power of human creativity and collaboration that defines the common, distance dissolves. The political is revealed as proximity and as the purview of all. As Lingis writes, “ecstasy surges from the lower depths of the psyche, the body, and society. Those who find ecstasy do so not by visiting the shrines of civilization but by trudging the swamps of human destitution and misery. [...] There is no such thing as private ecstasy. Since ecstasy is a breaking out of solitude, out of the self, since it is communication, it appears as an event in history” (169). Ecstasy presupposes a loss of self, which is to say the dissolution of subjectivity as identity and property. In its place is a transformed self: an irreducible singularity among others (multitude). Yet ecstasy is also a form of communication, which is to say it is a matter of *contact*—a haptic, tactile force.

The common is ecstatic precisely because it is a milieu of contact that touches everyone. In other words, the ecstasy and revelation of the common is not just an ethical relation with alterity. Nor is it only a respecification of political subjects as singularities. It is also a transformation of the political field to a model of *dissensus* that reveals its own visibility. The visibility of the common is necessary to conceive a positive political concept of peace as a project of dissensus. In other words, what the common reveals is the bare presence (and thus the political force) of those who have previously been rendered invisible by way of structure, definition, and global inequalities: the impoverished, the vanquished, the others. As Jacques Rancière explains, “Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself. Political demonstration makes visible that which has no reason to be seen; it places one world in another.” (38). The becoming-visible of the common is an encounter of dissensus and an exodus. It is a radicalization and globalization of proximity. It is a struggle, as Negri says, “to create peace *ex nihilo*” (60). It places one world in another as a project and a destination.

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