

Becoming engaged, surprising oneself

We are always already engaged, in spite of us and prior to all volitional, deliberate or articulate act of engagement. However, we can also *become* engaged: that is, we become answerable to the pervasive social norms and resources through which we come to be formed as engaged and engaging subjects. Occasionally, we might also become *critically* engaged in these established matrices and definitional closures of subjectivity that render and condition us as intelligible and relational beings. And we might do so in ways that are not unilaterally and hopelessly subsumed by the unjust and injurious logic of these matrices. In other words, such formative modes of subjectivation can serve a performative enactment of social and political engagement. This would be about an incalculable performativity of engagement (but also an engagement with the performative), which implies the indeterminate forces of responsiveness, critical displacement, vulnerability, persistence and resistance.

453

What interests me here is to think about this intertwinement between ‘always already engaged’ and ‘becoming engaged’ beyond a register of chronological and teleological transition from the ‘already’ to the ‘not yet’. This would require unsettling the division between a primary power, or interpellation, which constitutes and forms the subject and a secondary force of self-originating self-in-becoming as external to those constitutive powers of subjectivation. Instead, the intertwinement between ‘always already engaged’ and ‘becoming engaged’ invokes the way in which performativity takes place as a situated contingency: incessant, non-teleological, and unattainable – because it is through its unattainability that engagement is sustained.

This performative conjunction of ‘always already engaged’ and ‘becoming engaged’ seeks to address the inherently ambivalent and undecidable powers of subjectivation: subjects are constituted and regulated, but in contingent, differential, unforeseen, and contestable ways, in ways that both involve and might displace the terms of subjectivation. The performativity of critical engagement (as much as the critical engagement with the performative) is always implicated in the nexus of that which it seeks to contest (Butler 1993: 1997).

Engagement as exposure

454

This is all about the sociality of engagement. Being engaged amounts to being reflectively situated and reconfiguring that very implication – in the nexus of that which critical engagement seeks to contest. And yet, one’s engagement can never and entirely be assumed as one’s own. It can occur only with others and through others. It concerns becoming available to each other. In our critical engagements, we are enmeshed with others, we get injured by others, and we take courage from others. We let ourselves be affected, altered, pluralized, exceeded, and prompted by several singular pluralities and plural singularities, to recall Jean-Luc Nancy. Our capacity and desire to engage critically with the world is indebted to this multi-layered relationality. In this sense, I would claim that engagement is a self-deconstructing mode; a mode of self-reconfiguration, which does not concern the self, but rather indicates a condition of becoming exposed to the other than oneself. Engagement, then, depends on one’s own constitutive disjointedness and openness to others. In this way, we might think engagement not in terms of autonomous and sovereign activity, but rather as inter-active and inter-passive process “of relating to norms and to others” (Butler in Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 68): in other words, as an ongoing and ir-resolvable dialectic of affecting and being affected.

In *Being Singular Plural*, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests the word *conatus* would be aptly translated as ‘engagement’. In his words: “To be responsible is not, primarily, being indebted to or accountable before some normative authority. It is to be engaged by its Being to the very end of this Being, in such a way that this engagement or *conatus* is the very essence of Being” (Nancy 2000: 183). For Nancy, engagement is linked to the responsibility of a certain connectedness. We are already responsible even before we assume responsibility. Responsibility is akin to what Nancy calls a “law without law” (*loi sans loi*). We are always already before this law without law – one that does not offer guidelines or prescriptions as to how, when, and with whom we should act. We are corporeally enmeshed in, and exposed to, it; and this exposure is what unceasingly constitutes our existence as co-existence (*être en commun*).

Engagement, then, entails being and becoming exposed; being and becoming answerable to others; appearing to others, and with others, in the world. As Nancy has shown evocatively, it is a matter of ‘singular plural’ existence, infinitely connected with the experience of freedom as ‘the affair of existence’. He writes: “The fact of freedom, or the practical fact, thus absolutely and radically ‘established’ without any establishing procedure being able to produce this fact as a theoretical object, is the fact of what is to be done in this sense, or, rather, it is the fact *that there is* something to be done, or is even the fact that there is the *to be done* [*à faire*], or that there is the

affair [*affaire*] of existence. Freedom is factual in that it is the *affaire* of existence” (Nancy 1993: 31, italics in the original). The question what is to be done, implying that *that there is* something to be done, is not reducible to the managerial logic of executing a plan. Rather, as much as it implies a pressing and urgent need, it is the overcoming of the logic of teleology, causality and immediately present effectivity. In Nancy’s words again: “History is perhaps not so much that which unwinds and links itself, like the time of a causality, as that which *surprises itself*. ‘Surprising itself’, we will see, is a mark proper to freedom” (Nancy 1993: 15).

The question of what is to be done, as a question which affirms, again and again, that *there is* something to be done, amounts to the register of *praxis* – including, of course, the *praxis* of thought – as an opening of time and space, which comes into being precisely through producing its own agents. Indeed, there is no agency that precedes the exposure to the ‘with’ of being-with. Furthermore, the register of *praxis* cannot be caught in the closure of either self-sufficient, self-affirming, free-willed agency (akin to liberal and libertarian individualism) or the deterministic subjection to a metaphysical power construed negatively as constraining system and univocal meaning. Rather, situated between and beyond these two outposts, engaged *praxis* is always that which opens the political to the incomplete, unforeseeable, and coexistential historicity of ‘surprising itself’.

455

Deconstructing actuality

Arguably, there can be no event without surprise (Critchley and Derrida 1994). The configuration of ‘surprise’ evokes here the political promise of a coming actuality, an actuality to come, or an actuality that comes to unsettle any mode of thinking existing actuality as given. So, I propose to think Nancy’s coexistential analysis in tandem with Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Heidegger’s existential perspective as well as with Judith Butler’s deconstructive account of performativity. Derrida has engaged with actuality through deconstructing its normative implications of presence and the present. Actuality, he writes, is *artificiality*, which “means that actuality is indeed *made*”. He continues by describing and deconstructing the performative forces that are at play in the *artificial* production of actuality:

“It is important to know what it [actuality] is made of, but it is even more necessary to recognize that it is made. It is not given, but actively produced; it is sorted, invested and performatively interpreted by a range of hierarchizing and selective procedures – *factitious* or *artificial* procedures which are always subservient to various powers and interests of which their ‘subjects’ and agents (producers and consumers of actuality, always interpreters, and in some cases ‘philosophers’ too), are never sufficiently aware. The ‘reality’ of ‘actuality’ – however individual, irreducible, stubborn, painful

or tragic it may be – only reaches us through fictional devices. The only way to analyze it is through a work of resistance, of vigilant counter-interpretation, etc.” (Derrida in Critchley and Derrida, 1994: 28).

Reality can never be fully present. It is always to be known, read, interpreted, acted upon, and re-enacted only within discourse and through performative reiteration that attempts to fix it. Although the underlying, non-present specificities and determinacies of actuality are never fully accessible to its agents, actuality is indeed a site of performative production. At the same time, there is always absence and spectrality at play in actuality. As a relation of simultaneous difference and deferral, the relation of the actual and the possible is inextricable and imperfect. *Différance*, then, is what leaves the space open for the as-yet-unrealized possibility: a possibility with no guarantees, no purity, and no teleological conclusion. Actuality, in this sense, is an infinitely undecidable articulation of the relation of the actual and the possible that constitutes *différance*. And so engagement entails a new thinking of the possible, which is itself riven with difference.

456

The *aporetic* structure of engagement

What is implied in this deconstructive reading of the performative forces that are at play in the *artifactual* production of actuality is the political gesture of engagement as *aporia*; or, to put it differently, the political gesture of engaging with the impossible as the *aporetic* condition of the possible. And yet, how do we make sense of the experience of the *aporia*? Through what fictional devices – i.e., the possible as impossible, the impossible as possible, or the impossible as becoming-possible – do we engage with it? Here is how Derrida thinks the register of becoming possible: “as an impossibility that can nevertheless appear or announce itself *as such*, an impossibility whose appearing as such would be possible (to *Dasein* and not to the living animal), an impossibility that one can await or expect, an impossibility the limits of which one can expect or at whose limits one can wait” (Derrida 1993: 73).

The waiting that Derrida mentions is beyond active vs. passive. It involves and compels being disposed toward others, responding, acting, and engaging. Rather than amounting to impossibility itself, *aporia* engages the impossible as possibilization. It carries within it the imperative to think in action before nonpassable borders. Engagement, as deconstructive thinking in action and before nonpassable borders, is a commitment to infinitely bringing forth and making possible what has been foreclosed by those matrices of recognizability that pass as ‘present actuality’. As much as engagement presents itself in the ontological terms that have hitherto defined presence and the present, it also works to transform these very terms. Thus understood as deconstructive engagement with actuality, engagement remains

urgently attentive to the multiple ways through which the actual exceeds that which can at any given moment be discursively assimilable into the normative power of 'given' actuality. It indicates what is not yet and what renders one answerable to the other.

The politics of engagement as performative event

Taking place at the abject borders of signification, critical engagement seeks to contest, in Judith Butler's words, "what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary" (Butler 1997: 145). It does so through working with/in historically situated processes of subjectivation, regulatory laws, social temporalities, im-possibilities, failures, embodied positionalities and relational differences. In this sense, critical engagement plays out within the realm of materialization, which, in Butler, concerns a historically specific temporal process of sedimentation of pervasive discursive effects. It emerges in as well as reiterates and possibly eludes or displaces "a chain of binding conventions" (Butler 1993: 225). The performative force of critical engagement is derived from the citationality/iterability of signification: namely, the movement of decontextualization, expropriation and reappropriation that allows for a possibility of infelicitous reiteration, resignification and even unpredictable transformation of/within these preceding and binding chains of constitutive conventions. So, the possibility of alteration – as a space of persistent and irresolvable ambiguity – is inherent in any established discursive convention. Critical engagement exposes, and becomes exposed to, the contingent iterability of the norms and their aberrations.

457

The unanticipated possibility for resignification, which emerges in the context of differentiation and deferral of meaning, becomes the site of what Butler calls "opening up the possibility of agency" (Butler 1997: 15). Agency, however, does not indicate the restoration of a sovereign individual subject of speech and action, but rather a discourse's iterable and productive force that enables the inherently unstable and ambivalent process of subjectivation:

"The paradox of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (Butler 1993: 15).

Performative engagement extrapolates the multiple and indeterminate ways in which signification is haunted by "that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the non-narrativizable, the traumatic" (Butler 1993: 188). At the same time, deconstructive performativity relies upon discursive citationality as an open but situated possibility of resignification, rearticulation, and

change. In ‘failing’ to achieve a definitive identification and final materialization, the performative emerges time and again as “an exercise of articulation that brings an open-ended reality into existence” (Butler in Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 130). As Butler writes: “In this sense, what is constituted in discourse is not fixed in or by discourse, but becomes the condition and occasion for further action” (Butler 1993: 187). It is precisely this ineradicable caesura that enables the always unprefigurable, and potentially subversive, performative politics of critical engagement.

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