



Philosophy in the Boudoir and the Streets: An Interview with Simon Critchley

Simon Critchley and Carl Cederström

When I recently asked Simon Critchley in a TV-show how he ended up as a philosopher he laconically proclaimed: ‘failure’. He claimed to have failed not only as a musician and a poet, but also as a political activist.¹

If failure was the way into philosophy for Simon Critchley, then philosophy seems to have been the way into success. His many books have attracted much attention and, as all philosophical works worth their name, stirred quite some controversy: from deep resentment in some corners, to pulsating admiration in others. Either way, he has covered a wide range of themes, including humour, ethics, poetry, film, literature, deconstruction and death. He has led a rather wandering life, having lived in a number of non-exotic western-European countries. For a few years now, however, Simon Critchley is comfortably settled into New York, recently married, and is the holder of a chair in philosophy at the New School for Social Research.

I met Simon Critchley at a club in Soho last summer. He had arranged a very elegant room for the interview. It was splendid. With silk cushions spread over the floor, and lit candelabras lined up along the walls, it reminded me of a boudoir, perfectly suitable for half-concealed indecencies. However, half-way through the interview, a man and a woman, both rather tipsy, entered the room. They threw themselves on the divan, quite arrogantly, and asked if we were doing some drugs (I suppose two grown-up men sitting with crossed-legs on the floor in a boudoir might evoke such an idea). Politely, yet irritatingly, we ignored them; then, when we realized they wouldn’t leave us alone, *we* left, like two passive-aggressive cowards with dismantled self-esteem, and went out on the street. We finished the interview – which appropriately touched on issues of courage and comedy – in one of those desolate Indian restaurants with blinking fluorescent lamps. Of course, none of us mentioned the fact that we had acted as humorless cowards back at the club. Why would we? Instead we spoke of humour, politics and philosophy, Simon’s recent controversy with Slavoj Žižek, and whether a corporation can be ethical. It was, all in all, a splendid night!

¹ The philosophy show, which was broadcasted in Sweden early 2008, can be watched at: http://viastream.player.mtgnewmedia.se/inner.php?TvSkin=tv8_se&PKCatID=1950

Carl Cederström: You have said that philosophy begins in disappointment, not wonder. But a common way into philosophy seems to go through reading, say, Albert Camus, Hermann Hesse, Jean-Paul Sartre or Bertrand Russell – authors who often generate a sense of youthful wonder; or, better, trigger a sense of wondrous alienation, where the reader can identify with the image of the rebel or the outsider, images which seem particularly appealing to confused adolescents.

Simon Critchley: Well, for me philosophy begins in disappointment. But youth and disappointment, I think, are not incompatible. You could actually say that philosophy is an experience of youth: both biographically, as a time in one's life, and philosophically, that there is something exhilarating in the discovery of the new. For me it was the experience of something being stripped away, that things – like morality, religion, politics, ideology, and the rest – are *not* the way you've been told they are. It is an experience, an exhilarating experience, of disillusionment. So philosophy is this excitement, not with an experience of wonder with regard to what is, but an excitement and exhilaration with regard to what isn't. Disappointment and excitement are, in this sense, two sides of the same coin. There's something enormously exciting about being disappointed, something enormously exhilarating about being disillusioned. And that is also, as you say in your question, an experience of rebellion.

CC: Let us swiftly turn to politics, an important theme in your work. You have said that a characteristic response to today's politics is a passive withdrawal from the world. How would you like to define, or diagnose, the present political situation?

SC: I have at least three political categories for thinking of the present situation: military neo-liberalism, neo-Leninism and neo-anarchism. Among these three I think that military neo-liberalism is what best characterizes the state of the western world. At the heart of this category is the idea of a unification of neo-liberal economics with a certain universalization of democracy and human rights talk, which is backed up with military force. So the situation we're in is one where other regimes have to accept the logic of capitalism, accept the ideology of democracy and human rights – and if they don't accept that, they're going to be bombed. That's the logic of military neo-liberalism. So the world is in a state of permanent war, in a state of chaos. In the face of a world that is blowing itself to pieces, where, as Dostoevsky says, 'blood is being spilt in the merriest ways, as if it were champagne', it is tempting to withdraw, make yourself into an island, close your eyes and pretend as if nothing bad goes on. This response, which is both plausible and coherent, but which I like to refuse, is what I call passive nihilism.

CC: But the opposite response, to actively engage in politics: dutifully go to the voting booth and to publicly express your opinions, couldn't that also be a way of distancing yourself? At least this is what Žižek claims in his book *On Violence*, 'that sometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing you could do'.

SC: I'm simply not in agreement with Žižek here. His argument is that in a world defined by systemic violence – actual violence, as well as symbolic violence – one needs to step back, reflect and wait. For me, this is the obsessional neurotic position, and that's why I have called Žižek, in the response I wrote for Harper's Magazine, 'The Slovenian Hamlet'. Hamlet lives in a world defined by violence, where the time is out

of joint, where one's father is killed illegitimately, and where the order of kings and social hierarchies has broken down, and as a result Hamlet cannot act. He dreams of an act of vengeance, of which he lacks the courage, and ends up doing nothing. In Žižek you also find this horror of the immediacy of action. He will say things like: I have a hat but I don't have a rabbit. I think that's overly pessimistic although I can understand the diagnosis. What interests *me* are forms of resistance, which takes into account the situation we're in, but doesn't stop there, but goes on and tries to act in new imaginative ways. This is where neo-anarchism comes in: as the articulation of the possibility of new forms of coalitions, new chains of equivalence; and in that regard, unlike Žižek, I'm not dismissive of anti-capitalist movements of resistance and protest.

CC: This leads us to what seems to be Žižek's main critique against your work: that the forms of resistance you advocate, forms of resistance that retain a distance to the state, are futile.

SC: Yes. The argument that Žižek makes against me is that these demands are powerless – that they don't change anything. He's right and he's wrong. In a way, all forms of resistance are powerless. You could even say that the history of political resistance is one long history of failure. The student protest in Paris, 1968, was a failure: the events took place in May, and already on June 23 1968, De Gaulle was elected back into power. And the list of failures goes on. What we should remember is that the effects of resistance are often experienced retrospectively. I think that to judge political resistance by the standards of its effectiveness, at the level of political power by occupying the terrain of the state, is a delusion – a Leninist delusion. The argument here is really an argument of state power vs. no power. For Žižek resistance is futile; resistance is surrender. We have to occupy the terrain of the state – which is also the argument that Lenin makes in *The State and Revolution*. This is Lenin's critique of the anarchists: that the anarchists are unrealistic and bourgeois; that they lack the courage and ruthlessness to accept the cruelty of political reality. So what has to be done, according to Lenin, is occupying the state such that it eventually withers away. The obvious historical objection is that this never happened. Instead, the Bolshevik revolution led to the most grotesque elevation of the state, in the form of the Soviet Union, and to human disasters. So it could be said that the debate between Žižek and myself is really a debate between Lenin and anarchism, or between Marx and Bakunin. Bakunin, in his critique in the 1870s, calls Marx a crypto-Bismarckian. He says that secretly, what Marxists want at all costs, is state power. I, contrary to Lenin and Žižek, argue for politics as the hegemonic articulation of an interstitial distance from state power, that cannot simply be judged by whether power has been taken or not. And with regard to the other issue – whether capitalism is here to stay or not – I think Žižek accepts that. I also accept it, but in a much more melancholic spirit. Who knows, but with the current global economic crisis, perhaps a certain model of capitalism is coming to an end. Perhaps we are living through the beginning of the end.

CC: An important addition to this formula is comedy, more precisely how humour opens up new ways of resistance. How does your notion of the 'comic subject of politics' differ from 'classical subjects of politics'?

SC: The classical subject of politics is a virile, active, autarchic, sovereign subject – a subject that *can*; a subject that is able to *act*. For me that goes together with a certain lack of humour, whether that is Bush or Bin Laden. They are both active virile political subjects, in some sort of bloody contest. What interests me about comedy as a form of resistance, is that comedy is the performance of powerlessness. The comic subject doesn't assume it has power, doesn't assume its virility. It performs its powerlessness, in acts of non-violent warfare – it is the power of the powerless.

So classical forms of the political subject are capable of acting; they are virile, they are potent and they are humourless. But most importantly they are justified in what they do. What interests me is to think of a political subjectivity that would find itself inescapably involved in acts which cannot be justified. I've been doing some work recently on Benjamin's critique of violence and there's a fascinating argument in Benjamin where he says that 'law is violence, politics is violence, but does violence exhaust the political field?' No, there's a guideline of non-violence which to him is expressed in the biblical prohibition of murder: 'thou shall not kill'. The situation in which that prohibition arises is a situation of violence: I know I cannot kill and yet I'm in a situation where I have to kill. The violence that I perpetrate is necessary but not justified. To think about an idea of politics based upon a non-justifiable sphere of violence, is fascinating. This is similar to Judith Butler's claim about mourning. The classical political subject doesn't want to mourn, but to act. After 9/11, there were 11 days of mourning. Then mourning was declared to be over and it was time for action. The question that Judith Butler asks, which I find enormously interesting, is how a politics of grief and mourning would look like – a politics based around the powerlessness of grief and mourning. For me that's similar to the structure of the superego II and the comic subject.

CC: At the same time it has become increasingly popular among politicians to either mock themselves, or happily subject themselves to mockery. Take Stephen Colbert's talk at the White House Correspondent's Dinner, for example, where he scornfully delivered jokes at Bush's expense. Would this be an example of a powerful critique directed against the Bush administration or, on the contrary, a type of humour which is easily co-opted and turned into something positive for the Bush campaign?

SC: I think Stephen Colbert's mocking of Bush was a classic example of political satire, and a very powerful satire. It was nicely painful. I thought to myself, when I saw it, that this is a courageous act, this is a powerful thing. But sure, it could be co-opted. Political leaders can use humour in all sorts of ways. We should always remember that humour is radically situational and contextual. It can always be re-described in toothless ways.

CC: Let us stay with the relation between humour and co-optation a little longer. In the world of business organizations there seems to be an obsession with having fun, being happy and to be a bit on the crazy side. We see this in many organizations, of which Google is probably the most conspicuous. Employees, it seems, become obliged to participate in silly activities or whatever the organization find humorous. Does this pre-empt the possibility of powerfully using humour as a form of resistance?

SC: I actually gave a talk at Google recently, part of their authors@google program. They wanted me to speak of humour, so I went there and dutifully gave my views on

humour. Of course that's a classic strategy of co-optation. But I gave an example there, which is from my book *On Humour*, concerning the way in which corporations deal with humour. The example is from a hotel in Atlanta, where I was staying. When having breakfast one morning I saw a group of employees in one of these huge rooms, this sort of windowless suite you'll find in American hotels. They were engaging in structured fun: playing kick-ball, ping-pong, frisbee, whatever – you know, these forms of fun and humour which are being used in order to build up the morale amongst the employees. In this way, humour becomes a form of compulsory happiness – it becomes a *strategy* that organizations use to impose a compulsory happiness. If you don't go along with the structured fun, you're no fun, you're a party-pooper. So in that sense humour can be used by organizations as a form of coercion. When I was in the Google office you got people running around on scooters. They also got a vast recreation room with ping-pong and plastic balls, where you could exercise and have fun with your colleagues. This means that the line between work and play becomes increasingly difficult to draw, which by extension means that work never ceases – that play becomes another form of work, structured fun becomes a way in which the corporation regulates and organizes the behaviour of its employees. To that extent I think humour is extremely dangerous.

To go back to the example in Atlanta: after having watched the people engaging in structured fun, I met a number of them outside, smoking cigarettes and talking to each other. I asked if they were really free to refuse to take part of this or not. And they said that they were free to refuse but they would have been seen as bad employees or party-poopers. So they weren't really given a choice as to whether they wanted to be involved or not. But while smoking, they started to engage in a series of small jokes, talking about what a shit the manager who was organizing this was, and so on and so forth. So by standing there, smoking and telling obscene jokes, they created a non-organizational outside space, where they could be themselves.

So humour works in two ways in organizations. On the one hand it can be a coercive mechanism for producing false harmony amongst the workforce. But on the other hand, the informal circulation of humour, which occurs particularly through dirty obscene humour, can never be controlled. When I was working in factories in the late 70s, that's the way humour worked: really disgusting jokes, such as photocopied sheets of paper with vast sexual organs penetrating the secretary of the boss or the boss himself. So humour is about regulation but can still, informally, have a subversive potential. What we have seen though, in the last 20-30 years, is the use of humour consultants which study organizations in order to improve their spirit of ethos, and this I find oppressive.

CC: But could we think of something like an Ethical corporation, where the use of, say, humour could have a subversive effect?

SC: Can corporations be Ethical? I'm not sure. I would say that if they can, it is with great difficulty. Corporations, by definition, incorporate. The corporation is a sort of vast body, which you have to be part of. From a political perspective, the corporation is a totalitarian structure by necessity. Moments of Ethics would occur in those moments of obscene informal contact, when people say what they really think. But the flipside of subversion is recuperation. This lesson comes from the Situationists. Strategies of

subversion, or what the Situationists call ‘détournement’, are always recuperable. And again, subversion in humour is radically context specific. Certain jokes, at certain times, will subvert the situation. But that same joke can be employed by the organization, and turned into something positive, even an appetizer. There is this example with people complaining that Stella Artois beer was too expensive. What they, Stella Artois, did was that they internalised the criticism and turned it into their selling point, reassuring in their slogan that their beer was expensive. This is a common strategy by which a critique becomes recuperated as an organizational appetizer slogan. I think it’s always like that. The limit of subversion, or the place at which subversion can take place, is constantly moving. New forms of humour are powerful only for a brief period of time, after which they can be deployed by the very forces they were originally set out to laugh at. I think this is true of every form of humour. What that means is not that humour is useless, but that in any organizational framework there will be new forms of informal subversive wit, usually centred around obscenity. Obscenity is interesting because there might be a limit to the obscene which might not be recuperable. The obscene is an interesting category.

CC: When we’re already speaking of obscenity, let me ask you something about your relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis, a relation which seems to be rather ambiguous. In *Infinitely Demanding* you criticize Lacan and Lacanians for having distorted the picture of human finitude by making the subject too heroic, too authentic.

SC: Yes, my relation to Lacan is ambiguous. In *Infinitely Demanding* and *Ethics, Politics and Subjectivity* I claim that Lacan is heir to a tragic heroic paradigm that begins with German idealism. My main disagreement with Lacan, and the tragic paradigm as a whole, concerns a supposed link between heroism and authenticity. This comes particularly out of my critique of Heidegger. What Heidegger is up to in *Being and Time* – at least this is my understanding – is that you must choose your hero: either you choose *das Man*, the inauthentic life, or you choose yourself – the point being that you have to choose yourself as your hero in order to be authentic. So my main critique of Lacan boils down to a critique of linking authenticity with heroism, and I believe that argument has some plausibility. Badiou, however, has made an interesting response to this argument. He says that we could speak of a heroism of the void: a heroism which is not a heroism of authenticity, but a heroism of the divided subject. This means that heroism, rather than being the completion of the subject in authenticity, becomes the name of the evisceration of the subject in the face of an uncontrollable Event.

CC: But this is a reading which mainly concerns *Seminar VII*, and not so much the later Lacan, where the heroic subject is no longer based on an idea of pure desire?

SC: There are of course other aspects of Lacan – there are other Lacans, as it were – and in this regard I am happy to accept that my critique has its limitations. When I’m being defensive, I say that I’m just talking about *Seminar VII* – which is also what Žižek calls the heroic moment in Lacan’s teaching, appearing in the late 1950s. In Lacan’s later work it is clear that something else happens. In *Ethics Politics and Subjectivity*, I say that there is this tragic heroic moment, but that there is also a moment of comedy. Lacan’s genius in that seminar is to focus on the mute figure of Harpo Marx, as an image of the dusting of the Thing. The play of jokes and the comedy of the Marx

brothers, I would say, is also an articulation of the relation to the ethical subject and the real.

I'm thinking now of doing some work on psychosis. The idea is that there seems to be a relation between psychosis and mysticism. The mystic tries to empty itself, annihilate itself, in order to be filled with divine love. So the mystic achieves that glorification of his subjectivity through touching the divine. The material body is important here because it is through the wounding, or the marking, of the body that the psychotic tries to communicate, and become unified, with god. We find exactly the same structure in the psychosis of Schreber, or, indeed, in the psychotic patients I've come across. The material body becomes a body that is only completed in relation to the divine. In a sense the psychotic cannot complete their own body image without it.

CC: Are there any particular philosophers who would symbolise this form of mystical psychosis?

SC: The philosopher who comes to mind as the classic psychotic would be Spinoza. In Spinoza you have the idea that through the use of reason one attains an intellectual understanding of the divine, of plenitude of nature. This is what he calls 'beatitude'. The structure we find in both mysticism and psychosis – the unification of the glorified body with the divine – can also be found in certain philosophical systems, driven by that same fantasy of unifying the human with the divine. You could find that, as already mentioned, in Spinoza. You can find that in the hermetic tradition, with people like Giordano Bruno. You can also find that in Simone Weil, who was emptying out her body, physically, by self-starvation. She dies an anorexic death: starving herself to death, at the same point reaching a communion with god, which is a form of divinization of the self.

CC: Speaking of death, there's a growing interest in transhumanist studies and other related fields where increased longevity and, ultimately, immortality is conceived not only as desirable but possible. This usually comes with the idea of moving away from the human as we know it, to the post-human. What is your relation to this type of 'philosophy'?

SC: I think it is a terrible, pernicious, delusion. I think the idea that we become mind, that the human condition could be perfected through infinite longevity is a recurrent delusion in the history of thought – a pernicious delusion. I want to flip things around and say that what should be questioned in Western culture is the idea of longevity – that a good life is the same thing as a long life, a long life underwritten by medical science and development in technology. I claim that the material condition of possibility of being human is the body. The body withers and dies, it lessens and changes, and that is the constant reminder of who we are. For me, to be free is to accept the limitation of one's body, accepting oneself as a material and mortal being. That involves accepting that life is brief, and that life has to be embraced, affirmed and enjoyed in its brevity. I don't understand the idea of the post human. I think the human is a sick animal, maybe even an evolutionary mistake. But that's where we are. So the whole idea of disappointment is an acceptance of limitation: limitation, not as something limiting, but as the condition of possibility for flourishing, of freedom and life. Montaigne says that

he who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. What he means is that he who has accepted the limit of mortality, has become free. Therefore the idea of living for a thousand years is slavery for me. As simple as that. It is an ideology of human enslavement. A delusion which is bound up to an ideology of the future. For at least the last 500 years that in the next 50 years there will be developments such that we will enable us to live forever. This future is a tiny bit further away than we can imagine, but not that far. I think it's dreadful. There will certainly be a future, but any sort of faith in the future is a superstition. I believe that the only way of facing the future is by turning towards the past and listening to the counsel of the dead, the hard lessons of history.

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