

Carnevalesque Postmodern Provocations from Boris Groys' Argument



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Boris Groys' essay "Between Stalin and Dionysus: Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnival" is an important contribution to the interpretation of Bakhtin's scholarship and to the growing number of positionings of Bakhtin's work in relation to the power, ideology and constitution of the human subject. Groys' genealogical, and largely provocative thinking, processes what we could mean, and understand, as postmodern, in relation to the human subject. Groys' thinking about the discipline provides grounding for other thoughts, for other types of thinking. My contribution to ponder through these questions is by introducing Havel into the mix, to both understand and elevate what may be seen as the complex characteristic of creative thinking within the whirlpool of ideology, in order to contribute to the colourful polyphony of discourses.

For the Czech thinker Havel, substantial changes in the power relations within any ideologically driven society, but particularly society that is determined and subjugated by the communist regime, is to justify the shift from the traditional terminology associated with communism in the Eastern Bloc, such as totalitarianism or a dictatorship. For Havel (1985), this has become a question of a concern, of a discourse. While these traditional terms – perceiving communism as a dictatorship, as a total sum of totalitarian practices, is what and why they detract from the meaning of power relations, as they focus only on a description of the traditional form of a dictatorship. These dictatorship-like models of governance are usually connected with the cult of leaders, local lives, cultures and experiences, and are not dependent on any particular ideology, and are well depicted in the Stalinist era. On the other hand, Havel's term post-totalitarianism is bound by an extremely multifaceted "network of manipulatory instruments" (p. 24) that is supported by a "precise, logical, structured, generally comprehensible and, in essence, extremely flexible ideology" (p. 25), that responds to the scientific model of post-totalitarian society that is more cunningly structured. As Havel explains, the post-totalitarian system "... offers a ready answer to any question whatsoever; it can scarcely be accepted only in part, and accepting it has profound implications for human life. In an era when metaphysical and existential certainties are in a state of crisis, when people are being uprooted and alienated and are losing their sense of what this world

means, this ideology inevitably has a certain hypnotic charm. To wandering humankind it offers an immediately available home: all one has to do is accept it, and suddenly everything becomes clear once more, life takes on new meaning, and all mysteries, unanswered questions, anxiety, and loneliness vanish" (p. 25).

According to Havel (1985) the traditional features of the dictatorship-like system, such as the "revolutionary excitement, heroism, dedication, and boisterous violence" (p. 26) disappeared in post-totalitarianism. The post-totalitarian system operated like a business with its investments. The system itself needed to rationalize, and evolve. Post-totalitarianism was effective in controlling and disciplining citizens, as everything, including factories and shops, was state owned and centrally planned, removing any economic profit for the individual citizens. This aspect of self-reflection and self-transformation of the system is an important feature of the post-totalitarian society. The system possessed, as Havel argued, an "unprecedented and uncontrollable capacity to invest in itself" (p. 26). This was particularly visible in the investment in the prison systems, police, state security agents and the bureaucracy of the state. Havel noted that the post-totalitarian system had become "simply another form of the consumer and industrial society" (p. 27). This capacity to act like a business that invests in certain projects aimed at controlling citizens was a pre-requisite for the new post-totalitarian system. While it still had some of the totalitarian features, this shift in power represented how it had evolved and now behaved in a different mode.

Power in such an ideological setting is related to the truth. Truth has a different purpose and meaning in the post-totalitarian society than in other systems and ideologies. In the post-totalitarian system, living within a lie is woven together with living within the truth; and if a citizen – human subject decides to move from the private sphere into the public to begin living within the truth, he disturbs the peace of the public lie. For Havel (1985), the tension between the post-totalitarian power structures and living within the truth is not experienced through a real, institutionalized, quantifiable power struggle, but on the level of human conscience, on the spiritual, moral and existential level: in the post-totalitarian system, citizens encounter implicit power and influence each other. Somehow in such a system, perhaps not so dissimilar to the postmodern era, it is necessary to carefully tease out how truth is located in the thresholds crossed between public and private spheres.

The act of living within the truth is not restricted to an ostentatious resistance to the system in the form of dissident activity. Living within the truth can happen in the classroom, at a concert, at an art exhibition, or in everyday interactions between citizens. Explicit forms of power do not need to be demonstrated, or the exposed ideas do not need to be overtly political. For Havel, the act of resistance is grounded in everyday life, and within the responsibility of citizens' everyday existence, where the living condition of every aspect of public life becomes living within a lie. Havel's (1985) concern is that in the post-totalitarian system one would not fight against concrete, 'real', political power. In the post-totalitarian system power is distorted, complex, non-linear and produces aspects of truths. Living in the truth is thus essentially "humanity's revolt against an enforced position" (p. 45) and the system itself in its defensive strategy attempts to implicate those who try to live within the truth, and accuses them of greed for wealth and fame and of leeching off the working class. Citizens living within the truth, in line with what Havel calls the aims of life, are the main threat for the post-totalitarian system, although perhaps in other political ideologies this would not be noticed as an act of resistance: "If the suppression of the aims of life is a complex process, and if it is based on the multifaceted manipulation of all expressions of life then, by the same token, every free expression of life indirectly threatens the post-totalitarian system politically, including forms of expression to which, in other social systems, no one would attribute any potential political significance, not to mention explosive power" (p. 43).

So Havel's notion of the truth is not of a Cartesian nature as he does not seek the ultimate truth. The truth is very much concerned with power relations; and Havel's questioning is not so unfamiliar in relation to Boris Groys' teasing out of the argument about his version of postmodernism. However, Havel's writing is mostly concerned with the overall understanding of openness and honesty (Havel, 1985); it is an existential statement underlying his experience within the political framework. Havel emphasises the significance of truth as an act of resistance, and not as a positivist truth. Truth in Havel's writing is thus unidentifiable without understanding the lie that is present in the official ideological statements of the government (Havel, 1985). Therefore, Havel is more concerned with the tension between the truth and a lie, than with what necessarily constitutes the truth itself. For Havel, the truth is linked to the concept of power/knowledge and authority, such as the institution, state or government. If power is considered to be productive, it influences the way knowledge, and therefore truth, is produced by that authority. So truth is linked to each discourse, debated and constructed within power relations, and perhaps in any setting governed by any ideology, as Boris Groys' essay implies.

References

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