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ALLIANCE OF IMPOSSIBLE UTTERANCES**

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**TO ENDURE IN THE DISTANCES: A NEW ALLIANCE OF
IMPOSSIBLE UTTERANCES**

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Review of *Now it's Come to Distances: Notes on Shaheen Bagh and Coronavirus, Association and Isolation*

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A Book of Utterances

Now it's Come to Distances is a book of utterances. These utterances come from many fields: political, social, cultural, and aesthetic. Utterances which vary in their intensities and tonalities, utterances which are temporal, utterances which are eternal, but also utterances which act as subterfuge claiming immortality while being pathetically temporal.

There are at least two distinct sets of utterances in the book. We shall call the first set *expressive utterances*. These utterances express a set of dialectical relations between a series of oppositions; for example between political and the social, history and nature, sovereignty and biopolitics, freedom and mortality etc. But if we examine a little more closely we find that they can be formalized into a more general dialectical relation between *that which can be named*, which can be easily and necessarily identified – let's call this naming process *law* – and that which resists a clear identity, which cannot be named, which is the *unnamable*. Let's call this impossibility of naming *desire*.¹

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¹ The review stands fundamentally on Alain Badiou's distinction between classical revolutionary politics informed by what he calls expressive dialectics and his own invention of non expressive dialectics which seeks to subtract itself from the objectivity of the "world" in its quest for the subjective creation of new emancipatory political fiction. See Alain Badiou "Politics: A Non-Expressive Dialectics" in *Beyond Potentialities? Politics*

As Alain Badiou succinctly argues law is – beyond actual rules and regulations, even beyond jurisprudence formally speaking – *an operation of naming*. In that sense it is something akin to language which provides us with names and meaning. Law is not simply that which decides what is allowed and what is not allowed. Law or the principle of law, to be precise, is always that it names so that it can separate the normal from the abnormal, the correct from the incorrect, the citizen from the criminal, the healthy from the sick, the contagious from the immune. These are all problems of law but also problems of nomination. So law is the domain of necessity, it is necessary, it provides meaning, it helps us identify. Again what is understood by naming here? Naming is a relation between an object and the word, between reality/practices and language/discourse/knowledge. This according to Foucault, as Badiou points out, becomes the very basis of existence. So law is, in the final analysis, not just about rules and regulations but a process of naming which defines our existence. Law is always existential, ontological.

What do we understand by desire then? Again Badiou provides a simple definition, desire, he argues, is the search for that which cannot be named, which is beyond knowledge. It resonates with the definition of love as desire in Plato's *Symposium*, and also in Augustine where desire follows this same structure. Desire is the *craving* for that which cannot be named such that the true object of desire is not offered to knowledge. For example in Augustine, as Hannah Arendt illustrated, love has the structure of desire which makes *caritas* or divine love the impossible desire for God whose knowledge is not available². So the true object of desire, in the final analysis is a monstrosity, a certain 'other' which always escapes signification. In Soumyabrata Choudhury's book there are a set of utterances which express a relation between that which can be named and that which resists naming, which is unnamable; or in other words between law and desire. What we are calling expressive utterances is the unconcealment of this dialectic between law and desire.

between the Possible and the Impossible, eds. Mark Potocnik, Frank Ruda und Jan Völker (Diaphanes, Zürich 2011)

² For a detailed reading of the structure of love as desire and the distinction between material desire and the desire for God in Augustine see Hannah Arendt *Love and Saint Augustine* Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1996

Expressive Utterances

Let's take an example of such an expressive utterance which is analyzed early in the book: it goes by the name of "the dictatorship of mortals" (p.33). This inversion of the famous Marxist doctrine – and it is an inversion – is one among many such brilliant, sometimes polemical, sometimes poetic redeployment of enunciations in the book like "zero-degree immortality" (p. 37), "constitutive immunity" (p. 39), Theater and Plague (p. 123) etc. What we find in the expression "dictatorship of mortality" can very well be understood as a problem of names. What Chaudhury calls the "martyrological rationality of the modern state" (p. 50) is played out when death, which is contingent and material, is transfigured into the necessity of an abstract name: *nation*. Death in itself is absolutely in the domain of nature, it is contingent, it can happen anytime and it is inert. Death exposes what Achille Mbembe shatteringly calls in "Necropolitics" the "coldness of bones"³. In this sense death has no meaning, death cannot be named. Hence in the final analysis all desire, as Freud so well knew, is a desire for this meaninglessness of death. But it is this meaningless materiality of death which has to be transfigured, given a name and avowed. Nation is the 'immortal' name given by the state which conceals the inherent meaninglessness of the event of death which in itself is unavowable. The martyrological state tries to do exactly that.

What Choudhury's keen analysis of the "dictatorship of mortality" shows is an impasse created at the limit of this bio-political logic of sovereignty when the constitutive immunity of the state exposes itself in the form of what he calls the "epidemiological state" (p. 40). The impasse is expressed in the collapse of two processes of naming – naming the survivor and naming the martyr – in the figure of the doctor; or more precisely doctor-as-the-martyr in the epidemiological state. The figure of the doctor is attacked within the epidemiological state because society wants to immunise itself from anybody who is carrying the virus including the potential martyr. The modern immunitary paradigm of sovereignty is finally founded on a logic of survival where, like Elias Cannetti had remarked, "each man is an enemy of every other"⁴. Now this is a limit situation where the order of a system is revealed to be based upon disorder. To seek the immortal name of the martyr as the name of the nation comes into play

³ Achille Mbembe "Necropolitics" in *Biopolitics: A Reader* eds. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, Durham and London, Duke University Press:, 2013, 161-192

⁴ *Ibid.*182

exactly at this point so that order is restored, law is enforced, etc. His point is that in the threshold situation of an epidemiological state this collapse – of survival and death – is exposed, unveiled. This is the critical gesture implicit in the analysis of, what Chaudhury calls “auto-intervention” or “auto-analysis of society” (p. 38). It is a threshold situation in the “governance of society”(p. 33) where society seeks its enemy within its very midst which it wants to then annihilate for its own survival. This is part of a continuous process of classification and naming unfolding within society at a global scale whose origin remains a desire to survive against a natural enemy – the virus. It is a desire which is immediately named as survival. In other words the desire for survival becomes indistinguishable from the law of survival. This is the complicated structure behind the expressive utterance “dictatorship of mortals”.

Two things need to be underlined here. 1) The immunitary paradigm where sovereign legitimacy is sought through naming a crisis is a modern political problem. However it is only at the threshold, at the limit that this crisis-nature of the modern state is revealed. One can call this a *critical gesture* employed by Chaudhury; it is an *evaluative method*⁵ of finding a value of values or in other words analyzing a situation of crisis at its limit – a crisis of the modern crisis-state. This evaluative method is symptomatic of some of the most interesting critical bio-political thinking today.

2) Through this analysis we realize that in the final analysis such critical thinking is always *revelatory*. It unveils or unravels a problem of the relation between law and desire at the point of its impasse. We see that modern bio-political states cannot simply give up the desire of naming an immortal substance which would authorize its laws and rules. But political forms of modernity are informed exactly by a crisis of names. Unlike the pre-modern state which could name its immortal substance as god, modern sovereignty struggles to find a immortal name, because names, as we said, are connected to bodies and to find an immortal name is to find an immortal body. Modern fascism is a problem of this co-relation. In the case of a fascist state we have a situation where the relation between law and desire unfolds in a fashion, where law tries to name a body negatively, through its destruction. So the name

⁵ For a detailed exposition of the development of the concept of “evaluation” in Nietzsche’s critical thinking see Gilles Deleuze *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, New Delhi, Bloomsbury, 2018

“nation” built upon a martyrological rationality tries to name an immortal body – its people – through this inaugural moment of negation i.e through destroying other bodies and names. Therefore the desire for immortality which is supposed to be an unnamable desire, an unknown name immediately gets the name *nation*, constructed negatively, built upon destruction of other bodies and names. This is reminiscent of what Achille Mbembe calls the necro-political moment of modern sovereignty. This is what the expressive utterance of a dictatorship of mortals reveals at the threshold, at the limit of an epidemiological state.

Non-Expressive Utterances

The book however also evokes another group of utterances: we would call this group of utterances *non-expressive utterances*. Non-expressive utterance is also an operation of naming but a process of nomination which tries to grasp in thought desire at the very point of its impossibility. So what is the relation between the critical exposition of expressive utterances and the poetic formalization of non-expressive utterances in this book? I think the relationship between expressive utterances and non-expressive utterances is the essential problematique of this book. The critical expressive utterances and the formal poetic utterances, I believe, are two parts of the same movement of thinking. We can call this a *subtractive movement*. Let me explain this as briefly as possible in this last section.

Taken by themselves the critical expressive utterances run the risk of falling into what can be called *tragic utterance*; this has been, I would argue, the fate with so many brilliant critical expositions of modern bio-political sovereignty. As Nietzsche well knew a critique of utterances cannot but be an utterance in itself in so far as it produces an effect and therefore subjectivises. At least implicit behind a critical bio-political utterance is a search for a new form of subjectification which would announce an exit from a bio-political capture. Contemporary bio-political critiques are always a mode of thinking which imagines a new mode of subjectification outside the bio-political domain where life is not completely captured by law. This is also the point where an impossible relation between politics and philosophy is sought today. It is an impossible relation both from the point of view of philosophy which is argued to have come to its end and also from the point of view of politics which confronts its own retreat. It is at this moment of the “closure of philosophy and the

retreat of the political” that a “clearing” is sought in thought which bears the name of an impossible community.

For Agamben it is a *coming community* which lacks any presence and therefore has to be experienced in thought solely as the remainder which is always in excess to the passage of time. For Roberto Esposito it is the expropriation of substance which defines *munus* and therefore *communitas* is always contrary to any logic of ownership or property including the ownership of identity. For both of these thinkers critique is always followed by this “clearing” in thought which tries to imagine the impossible relation between politics and philosophy⁶. The biopolitical critique of the political is therefore a revelation or an unveiling which happens at the threshold of knowledge, at the limits of law, at the outer margins of existence which opens thought to its impossibility. This is the tragic tone of contemporary biopolitical critique. One can say that such tragic knowledge is gained at the very margins of knowledge of the very limits of knowledge. And what is this critical knowledge? It is knowledge of the very organization of knowledge, the structure of how the field of knowledge organizes itself when we look at it from its threshold. It is also the knowledge of how knowledge continuously requires that which is beyond knowledge, a certain non-knowledge in order to organize itself. In our vocabulary it is the knowledge of how names are assigned to objects continuously through establishing a relationship between the namable and the unnamable. In other words the tragic utterance of critique is always to unveil the relation between knowledge and non-knowledge, between law and desire at the precipice of pure desire, at the edge of the abyss from where one looks upon the unnamable but also at the whole topology constructed through a relation of law and desire.

In Chaudhury’s book one encounters such a precipice when he talks of the threshold of the relation between freedom and mortality in the government of society. It comes in the image of the doctor who buried his friend because no one else would. At this moment, at the very extreme limit of an “involuntary government of society,” there is an abandonment of the narrative of a *dictatorship of mortals* and its logic of immunitarian survival. But this is also an essentially tragic experience which offers a singular perspective. It unveils for us the very

⁶ For a critical engagement with the problem of thought as “clearing” as the basis of a relation between philosophy and politics see Alain Badiou “Philosophy and Politics in *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran, London, Continuum, 2008, 147-176

structure of the “government of society,” based upon the expressive utterance of a *dictatorship of mortals*. It is at this moment that the relation between freedom (rights determined by law) and mortality (as the meaningless, nameless domain of desire), which is always kept at distance under a logic of governmentality is exposed. At this moment freedom and death expose its indistinguishability.

Here freedom unfolds as a work of death; like *Antigone*, it is the tragic subjectivization of confronting the unnameability of death, the true object of desire as the ultimate act of freedom. The friend who does not care for his own survival, who confronts his own destruction in order to give some meaning, some dignity to the namelessness of an inert, material death comes not only as a moment of transgression but an anticipation of a new form of terrible but free existence in our mortal times. Can this terrifying name of a tragic immortality be a new principle of politics? This is Chaudhury’s question.

The tragic abandonment of the bio-political narrative offers the critical perspective we require to understand how law and desire, freedom and mortality are organized within a government of society. But if that is all the entire book offered it would become a tragic expression of our times which would struggle for a new form of life under the destructive horizon of a radical nihilism. But the book does not fall into this tragic poetic temptation. Therefore the book is not merely about the nakedness of a limit experience as the ultimate horizon of critical thinking. It is about trying to find a language of affirmation for a new collective experience. But this language of a collective affirmation does not oscillate between language and silence trying to capture “community” as the unavowable. This language comes as subjective statements which seek to formalize this new collective experience at the very point of its impossibility. It tries to name a whole set of utterances which we are calling non-expressive utterances. The intention, I believe is to build a new alliance of these non-expressive utterance.

I agree with this book’s implicit proposition that any true negation today has to move beyond the movement of traditional dialectic. This classical movement comprises a negation of negation – like say, in the orthodox Marxist understanding, the socialist State is created out of a negation of the destruction of the existent bourgeois social order. However for Marx, or at least a certain adventurous reading of Marx, the idea of the state defined by the utterance

“dictatorship of the proletariat” is not a state at all. Again as Badiou reminds us the “Dictatorship of the proletariat” is a new understanding of state which organizes its own disappearance – it is a state defined by its strange temporality – a time of the end of the time of state⁷. This is not negativity as simply destruction of the existent order followed by an overcoming of that order; that would be a classical dialectical movement of *negation of negation*. Neither is it a messianic understanding of negativity as the outcome of thought as “clearing” which conditions our current understanding of community. It seems to me that bio-political critique of the political has the danger of leading towards this kind of a messianic understanding of community based on negativity. The hidden postulation of Choudhury’s book is that to embrace negativity – particularly through the idea of community – which is the final outcome of bio-political critique today leads to a tragic mode of thinking as “clearing”.

Such bio-political thinking confronts the current melancholy of history busying itself either with the explanation of the management of the necessity of names or it tries to articulate the necessity of the unnamable in today’s world. Rather than these two possibilities of negativity the Choudhury’s book offers a logic of negativity conditioned by separation which confronts the current historical nihilism. Or better history as the site where thought as separation (and not clearing) takes place which retroactively changes our understanding of history. This idea of separation from the existent order to “create” a new name is the task of thinking that this book adheres to rather than the revelation of a “clearing” towards the unnamable. This is a subtractive gesture per excellence which tries to capture the thought of politics as a true fiction while simultaneously announcing the destruction of the given order of names. A true negativity then is something like a *disjunctive synthesis* of a negative part – the destructive element – and an affirmative part which is the subtractive or creative element.

A Disjunctive Synthesis

⁷ See Alain Badiou, ‘Destruction, Negation, Subtraction’, in *The Scandal of Self-Contradiction: Pasolini’s Multistable Subjectivities, Geographies, Traditions*, ed. by Luca Di Blasi, Manuele Gragnolati, and Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 6 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2012), pp. 269–77 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-06_15>

Chaudhury's book is an exercise in thinking of such true negativity which maintains such a difficult disjunctive synthesis of two parts – the destructive, negative part of negation and the creative, affirmative part of negation. The latter is what we have called non-expressive utterances while the destructive part is maintained by the critical expressive utterances. The non expressive utterances are seen from the side of subtraction and not from the tragic vision of a critique. However I think the book recognizes the destructive function of a critical gesture but it does not offer this destruction as the ultimate tragic response to our contemporary political crisis. It separates itself from the tragic destructive principle of the critical to affirm the unnamable, trying to formalize, even if poetically, that which separates itself from mere destruction. I am not saying that the critical gesture is abandoned. The destructive function of the critical gesture is maintained but at the same time it is not the ultimate function of the book. The tragic is the point of view of a form of radical nihilism which has been the essence of the retreat of the political and the 'opening' up to that which is unthought in politics. Choudhury adopts a different position: to think politics at the very point where it is rendered impossible. If "coronavirus" takes up the name of the impossibility of politics today, "social distancing" is the name of the impossibility of community today, then Choudhury's wager is to situate the thought of politics at the very point of its impossibility. Shaheen Bagh is the unconditioned utterance, prescriptive in nature that it is possible to think of emancipatory politics at the very moment when it is rendered apparently impossible.

I think that the desire to find a language of subtraction which is present in Soumyabrata's book, is indistinguishable from another desire which is internal to thinking. To find a way to articulate the desire for emancipatory politics is not in itself exclusively a political desire but a philosophical one. It is a difficult but essential effort of philosophy to find a form, a language to express the non-expressive utterances of pure desire. The last two chapters of the book are perhaps the most philosophical because they are symptomatic of this effort. It is not a question of celebration of naked, transgressive desire now that law is abandoned or destroyed. It is an effort to find new names for such unknown, unnamable, impossible desires which evokes Choudhury's own singular desire for thinking: the migrant's desire, the lover's desire, the desire of the woman who asks "what is to be done?" in Shaheen Bagh, has to be

supplemented with Choudhury's own desire for thinking at the very point of its improbability.

They are all moments of non-expressive utterances which are all gathered together in the book through what Choudhury evocatively calls "comparative passion": which is nothing but thought's internal relation to itself – philosophy's desire to think. This desire, this "comparative passion which passes through us in our isolation" (p. 23) oscillates between two poles; association and isolation.

One can think of "association" today as that which subtracts itself from the homogeneous ideology of "isolation". The exceptionality of our isolated condition made into a norm spells out the melancholy of our contemporary historical condition. The name for this historical melancholy is "the new normal". This is the uniform isolation against which Choudhury urges us to think of the subtractive isolation of thinking which passes through us creating new possibilities of associational thinking. This is an exceptional association – an association which isolates itself, separates itself from the survivalist association of Covid-society. The two terms "association and isolation" are caught in this subtractive logic, while individually they produce their own internal dialectics. Association is also isolation while isolation also produces association at the same time association is radically separated from isolation. I think the book not only evokes and tries to formalize certain non-expressive utterances but it is in itself a non-expressive utterance which is best captured by the subtitle title.

Let me end with two such non expressive utterances taken up by the author (though there are many more in the book): the indifferent utterance of the lover and the nostalgic utterance of the migrant. The indifferent utterance of the lover is not the erotic transgressive utterance of the reveler. The carnivalesque subjectivity is a transgressive subjectivity, embodied by the American youth partying on the beach – bodies in erotic proximity which transgresses the law of social distancing. Georges Bataille calls this "sin" a moment of transgressive sovereignty which activates an *absolute expenditure*. It is a concentration of desire which is similar to death because it transgresses the normal boundaries of a banal, everyday economy of desires. For the carnivalesque transgressive subject death is looked upon as an object like any other object which can be enjoyed. The carnivalesque utterance is therefore a certain form of comic utterance, a playful utterance which looks at the inert materiality of death, the

meaningless objectivity of death from the subjective superiority of something which can be enjoyed. But one cannot have such an exalted transgressive subject who negates law without law naming her as a transgressor. It then becomes a relation between law and desire where desire is posed antithetical to law; the enunciation of the reveler being ultimately an expressive utterance. The lover on the other hand by her banal, ordinary, everyday utterance “I love you” expresses, as Chaudhury points out, the indifference, the distance between the lover and the laws of the world. It is a moment of true negativity because it expresses a joy which is separate from the mere satisfaction of needs though it passes through them. It is the expression of a discovery of an individual who suddenly realizes that she is capable of being the subject of this absolutely contingent experience called love. But it is also an expression of freedom which is indistinguishable from discipline. You have to continuously and rigorously labor at love; create, invent new forms to express the unnamable desire for your lover.

Similarly the utterance of the migrant’s desire to return, which Choudhury analyses in the last chapter of the book, is also an impossible desire. It is the nostalgic desire to return to the familiarity of a home which is not exactly there, driving an individual to walk an impossible distance—a mad gesture of freedom of which the migrant realizes she is capable of. This non-expressive utterance of the desire to return, as Soumyabrata points out, must not be reduced to merely the survivalist logic of desperation. The migrant’s nostalgic utterance of an impossible desire must distance itself, subtract itself from the “desperate point of blocked historical reality” (p.165) which proclaims that they are not capable of such impossible desire.

The migrant returns not to the *space* called home but to the *distance* which is sustained in the duration of her walk; and the lover in her joy sings of the distance which continuously unfold between two bodies, but a distance which continuously has to be experienced in time and never given the identity or the extensive reality of a goodbye, *the finality of an adieu*. Now it’s Come to Distances tries to show how it is possible to inhabit such a duration which continuously metamorphosizes spatiality into temporality, distance into duration. This is what I would call the problem of *endurance*. What Chaudhury’s book imagines is a new alliance of all these non-expressive utterance as the durational experience of a fiction – a set of utterances which endures the melancholy becoming of history through their subtractive

gestures. It gathers together materials, in the form of utterances, to create a fiction of a collective future which cannot be reduced to just one proper name, or one grand experience and yet can be made available to all because it is endured as a subjective possibility.

The Tragic-Comic Metaphor of Distance

This alliance of non-expressive utterances – which is historical – cannot be reduced to a tragic utterance of subjective nihilism. Neither can it be called a typically comic utterance, a playful utterance of transgression.

This is where Chaudhury is writing not just a book *about* utterances, but a book *of* utterances, which tries to enunciate something new suspending itself between the destructive moment of the tragic and the affirmative moment of the creative playfulness of the comic – a real, concrete affirmation of the negative. Finally I think this utterance can be called something like *tragi-comic* utterance which is the name I would suggest for the subtractive gesture of the book.

It is to look at negativity from a concrete, creative and affirmative point of view. It is a point of view which imagines a fiction of a possible alliance among a series of non-expressive utterances – a fiction created out of the series Muslim, migrant, lover, impossible European etc. In this process of imagining a fiction it helps us forget, or makes us indifferent to the existing laws of history. To rigorously be able to think of this fiction is to live in the anticipation of a collective future where the utterances of the lover, the Muslim, the migrant, the impossible European immigrant all find a kind of common ground. But it is a ground which is not spatially bound because it is an in-between space. To inhabit this space is to endure in this in-betweenness. You know, the word metaphor perfectly illustrates this problem of in-betweenness, this distance between two identifiable points. It is well known that metaphor comes from the Greek word *metapherein/metaphora*– which means in transit, in transfer. “*When it comes to distance*” is the non-expressive utterance of distance as the metaphor for duration, for life, for becoming, whatever you might call it. It is because, I think, metaphor is originally subtractive in structure; it destroys the place from where it comes to create the place where it is supposed to arrive. The arrival is impossible without the

destruction of the place and yet it has to create a new place – which is not yet fixed, not yet clearly namable, identifiable.

In the last few lines of the book Chaudhury remarks,

Let us not fool ourselves. The erotic abyss opened up a long time back – but who is to say that the song is not a song of the abyss? Who is to say that the last meeting is not an affair of distances insomniacally carrying on while shutters are downed, spaces shrivel up and bodies immunize themselves to sleep? Who is to say, erotic insomnia didn't precede the sedation of society – and will not outlast it?

It's Come to Distances is, in the final analysis, a metaphorical utterance of non-expressivity. It does not simply use the metaphor of distance to prove a concept; it tries to construct that concept metaphorically. It is not just a book about the metaphor of distance but a metaphorical utterance, an utterance of distance. It is a book not just about the various meanings of distance, but a book which tries to give form to the subtractive gesture of all thinking, *the task of thinking within distances*.

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