

Rethinking Political Practice as Continuous Insurrection

VIREN MURTHY

Etienne Balibar, *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 365.

The concepts of equality and liberty form the core of modern political culture. And yet, the definition of these terms changes depending on the qualifiers that are attached to them. For example, political theorists have long debated distinctions of positive or negative liberty, formal or real equality. At the crux of these debates lies a more fundamental, constitutive contradiction between these two concepts: freedom when exercised on the capitalist market leads to inequality and when the state enforces equality, it does so by undermining the freedom of certain individuals. Moreover, rights to both freedom and equality require some type of legal apparatus that is customarily bound within nation-state. The connection between nation-state and rights leads to another paradox: liberal ideals of freedom and equality—for instance as they are embodied in the idea of human rights—point beyond the nation-state, but their institutional backing is bound to a particular territorial boundary. While these are not new ideas for Etienne Balibar’s the present volume offers the most substantial collection of essays dedicated to the above issues available in English.

As is well-known, Balibar was one of Louis Althusser’s most famous students and a contributor to the now classic text on structural Marxism, *Reading Capital*. Since that book was published in the eventful year of 1968, Marxist theory has taken a great number of twists and turns, especially with respect to the political project of realizing freedom and equality. But the year 1968 was also a highpoint of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which I believe will offer some insights into Balibar’s theory. In particular, I will follow one strand of Balibar’s argument, which points to a continuous dialectic between a transformation of existing institutions and the reconstitution of new frameworks of governance.

As the subtitle, “Political Essays” indicates, the book is a collection of writings that tackle themes surrounding political theory, practice and Marxism from different perspectives. The book consists of a total of 12 chapters, which are divided into three sections, “The Statement and Institutions of Rights,” “Sovereignty, Emancipation, Community (Some Critiques),” “For a Democracy without Exclusion” and a conclusion,

“Resistance, Insurrection and Insubordination.” The chapters move from the large constitutive contradictions surrounding equality and liberty to problems of sovereignty, exclusion and social movements, to a final section on an ideal envisioning a new type of democracy without exclusion. In many ways, we can read *Equaliberty*, like much of Balibar’s work since *Reading Capital*, as a text that asks about how to continue the Marxist project today. This project implies rethinking and realizing democracy without the exclusions of class, gender, among of a host of other inequalities, while at the same time overcoming the systemic and structural domination of capitalism as a whole. Balibar’s work shows that this will be a continuous task.

Although *Equaliberty* is a quite different text from *Reading Capital*, we can identify a basic similarity, namely *Equaliberty* presupposes the critique of Hegelian Marxism that *Reading Capital* advanced in 1968. In the earlier text, Althusser famously remarked that “no Hegelian politics is possible strictly speaking, and in fact there has been no Hegelian politician” (Althusser and Balibar, 1990: 95). This critique of Hegel was actually geared at Georg Lukács’ reading of Marx and his visions of capitalism as a totality. Althusser countered Lukács’ vision of an expressive totality in which all elements express the same essence, with an idea of a structured or relational totality, in which various elements were articulated with one another to form a whole. Focusing on articulation allowed Althusser the freedom to develop the beginnings of a theory of the state-apparatuses, ideology and interpellation. While Althusser used such a theory to explain the process of subject formation, he did not really account for politics. Balibar’s book is precisely about how the constitutional order, along with its presuppositions, contains contradictions that could be productive for politics. His definition of equaliberty involves such contradictions and possibilities:

I proposed that we regard as crucial the moment of revolution that inaugurates political modernity, making equal right the concept of a new kind of universality. It would be essentially constructed as a double unity of opposites: a unity (even an identity of goal) of man and citizen, which from then on would appear as correlative despite all the practical restrictions on the distribution of rights and powers; and a unity (even identity of reference) of the concepts freedom and equality, perceived as two faces of a single “constituent power,” despite the constant tendency of bourgeois political ideologies (what we would generally call liberalism) to give the former an epistemological and even ontological priority by making it the natural right par excellence (to which the inverse socialist tendency to privilege equality responds). What particularly interests me is the element of conflict that results from the unity of opposites. It allows me to understand why claims for increased powers for the people or emancipation from domination that result in new rights inevitably take a revolutionary form. In simultaneously demanding equality and freedom, one reiterates the enunciation that is at origin

of modern universal citizenship. It is this combination of conflict and institution that I call the trace of equaliberty. (4)

Equal right inaugurates political modernity, with a new kind of universality that is contradictory because it cuts in different directions and is at once national and global. Balibar notes the opposition between the rights of man and the rights of the citizen. The former refers to a universal right that goes beyond national boundaries and the latter is institutionalized by the nation-state. Both, however, are in some way connected to capitalism. Balibar acknowledges Jaques Bidet's input in the forward of the book, and it might be Bidet's work that can ground this tension between the rights of man and rights of the citizen to the structure of capital.

Bidet also takes his inspiration from Louis Althusser and, in a series of books, argues that capitalism should be thought of as an intersection of two structures, namely market and organization (Bidet, 2004; Bidet, 2011). Market refers to the realm where people buy and exchange commodities as free and equal producers, often involving legally binding contracts. Organization, among other things, helps to enforce these contracts and consists of institutions such as the state, which would guarantee the rights of the citizen. In capitalist society, class relations pervade both market and organization. In the market, capitalist can dominate wage-laborers, and on the level of organization, people judged with competence have the power to rule the common people. Already in this conjuncture of structures we have the basis of equaliberty since the both the market and organization presuppose free and equal producers or free and equal citizens. Bidet calls this presupposition of freedom and equality the metastructure, which refers to the normative presuppositions that undergird the idea of the market. These presuppositions are both normative and ideological. They are ideological because although the market presupposes equality and freedom, once the market becomes capitalist, freedom and equality become extreme unfreedom and inequality. This is partially because in the circuit from money to capital to more money or surplus value, there is a social dynamic, which entails a distinction between capitalist and working classes. In short, when we compare capitalism to earlier societies, such as feudal society, we can conclude that a capitalist market entails formal equality, but this systematically turns into real inequality. Although the ideals of freedom and equality are buttressed by organization, the boundaries and scope of these presuppositions are not easy to discern.

In the book under question, Balibar is fundamentally interested in how to theorize various transformative movements that could enable to go beyond the domination and exclusions of the present world and bring about socialism on a global scale. In this context, his idea of the "active citizen" and "resistance" are crucial.

I suggested an association between the names “resistance, insurrection and insubordination,” taken as so many modalities of the critical, negative relation to the law and to power, and the symbolic events of our recent national history, yesterday or the day before, to which there are still living witnesses among us. (282-3)

Note the “negative relation” of the individual to law and power, which implies that citizens do not merely act within the law but push the law beyond its limits, thus expanding its inclusionary potential. From this perspective, the active citizen is precisely someone who is involved in insurrection. Balibar explains:

The active citizen is not, on this account, she who, by her obedience, sanctions the legal order or the system of institutions upon which she has directly or indirectly conferred legitimacy by an explicit or tacit contract, materialized in her participation in representative procedures that result in the delegation of power. She is essentially the rebel, the one who says *no*, or at least has the possibility of doing so. (283-284)

Given that Balibar invokes the citizen as rebel along with ideas of insurrection, it is natural to compare Balibar’s ideas with Mao Zedong’s injunction that “it is right to rebel” and the politics of the Cultural Revolution more generally (Zedong).¹ Recall that in 1966, Mao called on the Chinese masses, and especially the youth, to rebel against the system. This was his way of, at least in theory, rejuvenating society and making people into active citizens who could criticize the party. We can continue to see the Maoist overtones of Balibar’s book when he asserts that:

If some . . . do not take opposition on themselves and exercise the function of dissidence, then there are only passive citizens and therefore eventually no citizens at all but only more or less participatory, more or less governable subjects of administration or power. Democratic citizenship is therefore conflictual or it does not exist. But this also means that democratic citizenship—as revolutionary episodes illustrate par excellence—implies a certain intrinsic relationship to death. In order to save themselves or remain alive as a community of citizens, the city must run the risk of destruction or anarchy in a confrontation with its own members from which nothing can protect it, above all not criminalizing dissidence or suspecting conscientious objection of treason. (284)

The key difference here is between passive subjects and active citizens. In addition to Mao’s China, Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” could also help us understand this distinction. In both texts, there is a concern that people will become the mere objects

1 For a discussion, see Alain Badiou, 2005.

of rule, rather than subjects of political action. In a market capitalist system, where a realm of civil society is institutionally separate from the state, citizens tend to become subjects who merely consume, rather than participate in politics, which is often monopolized by a party-politics embodied in the state. Using Bidet's model, politics is left to the "competent leaders" (*dirigent competents*) in organizations such as the state. In the case of Mao's China, there is something similar in that it is the "competent" party members who lead and participate on behalf of the people. Notice from earlier citation that the active citizen does not merely participate through the mechanisms of representation; rather she rebels against them, thus intimating the mortality of the present political system.

Such a rebellion implies a democratic citizenship, which in turn is connected to the possible and actual death of society. Here again, Mao's cultural revolution serves to exemplify this idea of social death and rebirth, a radical reconstitution of society through active rebellious political practice. The Cultural Revolution tended of course towards anarchy, which gave rise various types of domination and Balibar is of course not advocating repeating this period of history. Rather, Balibar's work echoes that of the Chinese New Leftist, Zhiyuan Cui, who in the mid-1990s caused a great deal of controversy when he called for the institutionalization of the Cultural Revolution (Cui, 1997).² Cui's characterization anticipates Balibar's conception a continuous the dialectic between insurrection and institution. In various parts of the book, Balibar attempts to show how this contradictory dynamic of insurrection and institution has played out historically in various areas from issues of secularization, liberalism and the recent uprising in the banlieus of Paris. The book poses important questions for political theory and deserves to be widely read, discussed and debated.

Works Cited

Althusser, Louis and Balibar, Etienne. *Reading Capital*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 2011. Print.

Badiou, Alain. "An Essential Philosophical Thesis: 'It is Right to Rebel against Reactionaries,'" *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Vol. 13.3 (2005): 669-677. Print.

Bidet, Jacques. *Explication et Reconstruction du Capital*, Paris: PUF, 2004. Print.

² The essay is also available at: <http://www.mitbbs.com/bbsann2/news.faq/Salon/temp3/M.990459091.A/崔之元：毛泽东文革理论的得失与。> Last accessed May 25, 2014.

Bidet, Jacques. *L'État-monde: libéralisme, socialisme et communisme à l'échelle globale*, Paris: PUF, 2011. Print

Cui, Zhiyuan. "Mao Zedong wenge lilun de deshì yu xiandaixing de chongjian" [The contributions and shortcomings of Mao Zedong's Theory of the Cultural Revolution and the Reconstitution of Modernity], in *Zhongguo yu shijie*, vol. 2. 1997. Print.

Viren Murthy teaches Transnational Asian History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of the book, *The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan: The Resistance of Consciousness*, Leiden: Brill, 2010 and co-editor of *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationalism and the Politics of History in East Asia*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, and co-editor of *Global Historical Thought*, London: Blackwell, 2014. His major interests include, Marxism, Postcolonialism and social theory.