

How to Save the World: A Politics of the People

MATHIAS NILGES

Enrique Dussel. *Twenty Theses on Politics*. Duke University Press, 2008. 184 pp.

At the center of Enrique Dussel's *Twenty Theses on Politics* stand a series of basic yet monumental questions. What is power? What is politics? Can power be held? Can it be taken? Can it be exercised? If so, how? What is the relationship between power and the people, power and politics, politics and the people? Dussel's twenty theses are best read not as answers to these questions, but rather as propositions, or strategies for producing answers to such questions in the first place. Theses 1 through 10 propose a rethinking of the big questions the book addresses through a series of preliminary reflections on the interpretive and conceptual choices we tend to make when approaching questions of politics or power. Why is it that we often think of power as a negative thing? What if we thought of power as something positive? That is, what if we assumed that power does not simply equal domination, but instead that it is inherently a positive force? How would such a first step allow us to rethink categories such as "the people," "politics," "the state," "political institutions" and "democracy" in productive and innovative ways that additionally gesture toward the particular determinations of the present? Theses 11 through 20 contain guidelines for a practical implementation of a carefully developed methodological framework for rethinking political philosophy in the current conjuncture.

Before examining Dussel's lines of argumentation, however, a note on the book's general project seems necessary. To facilitate the generous reading Dussel's book deserves, we need to take seriously the genre within which he operates. Throughout the text, Dussel compares the structural logic of politics to the architectural logic of a house, stressing that politics is best looked at as a totality consisting of a series of interconnected systems (a gesture toward the influence of Systems Theory on Dussel's logic) or fields (a gesture toward the importance of Bourdieu's work for Dussel's methodology). Thinking about *Twenty Theses* in a similar way helps us appreciate the admirable project of Dussel's rich little book. It is not intended to provide us with a polished political or philosophical program; rather, through a series of provocative and thoughtful propositions, it presents us with the structural logic and theoretical blueprints of the architectural masterpiece of his *oeuvre*: a three-volume examination

of political philosophy from the perspective of liberation philosophy. Volume one of his trilogy was published in 2007 as *Política de la liberación: Historia mundial y crítica* and volume two in 2009 as *Política de la liberación: Arquitectónica*.

Dussel begins by drawing a link between two re-defined concepts: “will” and “power.” Against Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger, Dussel defines will as a positive force that constitutes the human being ontogenetically as a subject and phylogenetically as an always-collective entity. Will, in this sense, becomes the originary tendency of human beings arising from the desire to avoid death—as the “will-to-live.” Power, wrested from its assigned function in the tradition ranging from Machiavelli and Hobbes to Lenin, Weber and others, stands for Dussel as the consequence of this will-to-live, as a network of structural potentiality that determines and is concretely actualized by the political field as a totality. As such, power or *potentia* is always an aspect of the people and, Dussel reasons, can therefore never actually be taken—it can only be held (by the people). The payoff of such a redefinition is that it is not power that is called into question when examining instances of oppression and domination. Instead, the measure of the success or failure of political action becomes the degree to which power is either successfully exercised or “corrupted.” The general index of the corruption of power is the measure of what Dussel calls its “fetishization:” its use for individual interests and projects that are not directed at or growing out of the community itself. Examples of such individual interests include not only those of dictators, but also of elites, tribes and even classes, indicating that the category of “the people” as the generator of the political importantly means “all people.” The community (of all human beings), Dussel stresses, is the only subject of power. It is the community that transforms *potentia* (power “in-itself”) into *potestas* (power as actualized and institutionalized via concrete political channels emerging from the community). Dussel describes this transformation as a process of “delegation”: an instance of constituent power producing a heterogeneous network of systems of participatory democracy that give rise to diverse political fields. It is these political fields that actualize the diverse desires of the political community. Within such a system, the ideal operation for Dussel is the particular function of a singularity in the name of and guided by the universality of the community and its deliberative principles.

Dussel’s central project, driven by a distinct sense of historical urgency, is to produce a political philosophy aimed at a critique of the “prevailing system” and at the generation of a political program aiding political victims who are oppressed, repressed, excluded and murdered by what Dussel calls the “dirty wars of recent history.” In the context of this project, the need to rethink concepts like “the state” takes on particular significance. Recently, Bruce Robbins has asked us to reevaluate the state by looking at both (and by reducing it to neither) its potential to deliver orange juice (protection and support) and Agent Orange (oppression, violence and domination). Dussel poses

the question at an even more basic and arguably more rigorous level to illustrate how a rethinking of power and political action can lead us to a more differentiated understanding of the function of political institutions. Furthermore, Dussel situates his own understanding of these concepts clearly and convincingly in the context of a still vibrant debate surrounding concepts of the state, sovereignty, subjectivity and political action. Rejecting the “perpetual war” argument that runs from Hobbes through Schmitt and Foucault to Hardt and Negri and Agamben, Dussel redefines his terms in a way that opens up our understanding of the political possibility of power and the state in connection to ethical, participatory democracy and political action. In short, rather than assuming that civilization and social contracts are fundamentally characterized by conflict and contradiction, Dussel assumes a much more harmonious originary condition determining the relation between self, society and world to which we can appeal when judging instances of “fetishization.”

The ability to judge an instance of exercising power, therefore, rest upon a form of normativity that takes concrete form in political institutions that emerge from the democratic networks created by the desires of the people. A reformulation of Laclau’s concept of “universal equivalence,” Dussel’s version of progressive (that is, uncorrupted) politics is born out of “analogical hegemons,” strategic unifications of all political struggles in a specific situation. Political action gestating in such a hegemon in turn depends upon Dussel’s revised definition of “the people.” Pointing in the direction of Negri’s rejection of the concept of “the people” yet opposing his conception of the multitude, Dussel defines “the people” as a (not quite Gramscian) hegemonic social bloc that appears in specific historical situations and under certain structural pressures. Precisely what it takes to produce this event is not entirely clear. Yet, according to Dussel, certain historical situations give rise to a collective form of political action based on a form of consciousness that arises from an analogical hegemon of all demands. The political actor who emerges in this situation and who implements the analogical hegemon politically is the people. The people, in other words, is in Dussel’s model a heterogeneous bloc that is formed by and exercises political power via networks of participatory democracy, initially resembling Spinoza and Negri’s constituent power, yet always reproducing Dussel’s own variation on the idea of total or absolute democracy. Ethics becomes here both the genesis of political action and the only thing safeguarding the idea of progress, and it is at this point that Dussel’s logical determinations begin to appear forced and unpersuasive. The guarantor of liberatory political action, for Dussel, is the idea of “vocation”: the universal calling that politicizes the individual in the first place and urges her to act politically. Yet, there are of course always things like capitalism that introduce “bad” desires and corrupt the individual actor, at which point the only defense against non-progressive or liberatory politics is a variation on the vocation argument. A sense of “subjective obligation” produces happiness in those who act correctly. In turn, Dussel is left

no other recourse than scolding bad actors for doing the wrong thing. Affect-laden passages that begin with exclamations such as “cursed be those who...!” therefore, logically constitute rather underdeveloped instances of Kantian judgment. It is here that the horizon of political praxis is reduced to a naively subjective, even moralizing accounting.

Yet, it is not just the deterioration of critical rigor that troubles this portion of Dussel’s book. The idea of a subjective obligation or analogical hegemon also leads Dussel on a slippery slope that begins with the categorical imperative, moves through an ethics of deliberative democracy and ends with an ideologically suspect defense of alienation and repression in the name of deliberative democracy. Assertions of the flexibility of blocs and the deliberative and participatory basis for the formation of analogical hegemons barely hide the re-emergence of a distinct line of argumentation. Dussel runs into an old problem, namely that of the conflict between individual and collective desires. When moving through the logical steps that lead us from individual will to the collective desires of a political community and ultimately to political action through democratic institutions, Dussel begins to make “small” concessions. For instance, he admits that the political community cannot permanently act as a collective political entity because it needs to delegate power. In this process, as well as in the process of forming an analogical hegemon, the individual needs to accept certain sacrifices. At the very least, at the moment at which Dussel likens the necessity of curbing individual desires for the sake of delegating power and structuring political action efficiently to the division of labor, we begin to wonder: haven’t we been here before? Of course, Dussel is too skilled a theorist to miss the moments where he returns to the approximate territory of Freudian logic (and its political manifestations). Yet the ease (or lack of rigor) with which he dismisses such logical connections is troubling. His account of normativity, delegation and hegemony is not repressive, he argues, because individual concessions and models of efficient governmentality are based on heterogeneity and, most importantly, because ethics evidently allows him to dismiss the problem of structural repression: it is not repression and alienation arising from structural determinism, because the model is based on “subjective obligation” and vocation. According to Dussel, happiness in response to the normativity produced out of the structural, political implementation of the categorical imperative is symptomatic of progressive politics.

While it is difficult to generate positive affect out of such a formulation, the main problem here is of a structural nature. In his attempt to fuse politics and ethics in a manner that produces an institutional, normative component to an ethical vocation, Dussel accomplishes virtually the opposite. What begins with a variation on the idea of singularity (via Negri’s interpretation of Marx) ends in a complete ontologization of politics: a rather problematic operation, especially if a part of one’s project is to

produce an idea of political action that is based on a structural critique of the current conjuncture. This problem mainly emerges at the moments in which Dussel transitions with great difficulty from one theoretical register to another, unable to create a harmonic logical effect. His account of fetishization, for example, is rooted in Marx's description of the commodity fetish and its connected fetishistic inversion that underlies the process of reification. So, it is not just the ontologization of the political process that is the problem here. Instead, it is the sudden switch from structural analysis to the proposition of ethical and at times even affective solutions to political problems, that fail to persuade. Saying that Dussel works out the issue of politics and power on the level of ontology itself is certainly not a surprising insight into his work. What we are getting from him is a politics of the people—in every sense of the concept. What we are not getting, however, and this is the crux of the matter, is the structural analysis of the material problems of the present socioeconomic regime within which Dussel locates his political project. By limiting his structural definitions to a weakened version of ethics transposed onto the level of individual political choices, Dussel leaves fundamental political contradictions intact and unquestioned.

To be sure, Dussel frequently indicates the need to keep working through some of the main problems of his model. For example, Dussel is quite aware that integration of excluded subjects will not necessarily produce progressive results on its own. What is needed instead is the participation of excluded subjects as equals in a new political movement and structural order. Yet, while it is precisely here that Dussel gestures toward the necessity to resolve contradictions via dialectical sublation in order to be able to define progressive politics as collective action generating structural innovation, his ultimate unwillingness to commit to the dialectic and return to an ethical definition of normativity draws back all potential for “the New” into the a-historical vaguerie of a structure based on vocation. Moreover, Dussel defines liberation praxis as that exercise of power which produces history (structural innovation) through negative struggles. Unfortunately, it is this kind of negativity that could produce true sublation, which disappears in unspecific formulations of ethical universals, and, hence, Dussel closes off his logical universe as often as he opens it up in interesting and important ways. As a result, throughout the book we cannot help but miss the concrete temporality and dynamism of dialectical critique and are unable to shake the impression of a sense of logical stasis or even ahistoricity. There is ultimately nothing inherently historically specific about Dussel's definition of the massive terms with which he otherwise so rigorously grapples, which, again, clashes with the distinct sense of historical urgency regarding political action emerging from the need to address the defining political problems of our time that underlies the book's principal project. For instance, while we must be sympathetic to the intended project of this book, Dussel's move toward a politics of networks and diversity in the absence of a proper account of the function these concepts assume in neoliberalism is more dan-

gerous than helpful and is in fact counterproductive to Dussel's overall project. While indicating the connection between material history and the social, Dussel's persistent unproductive separation of Kantian and Hegelian traditions makes it impossible to produce convincing accounts of and solutions to material and structural determinisms that influence and disrupt the political field directly. As a result, Dussel is sadly not able to produce what would truly be needed at this moment, namely those productive fusions of theoretical traditions that add new momentum to the study of contemporary politics that are so impressively exemplified by Kojin Karatani.

The strongest points of his project emerge when Dussel fully commits to what is fundamentally a neo-Kantian theoretical framework. In these moments, Dussel arrives at an account of an interesting fusion of ethics, politics and the logic of networks emerging from considerations of the effect of neoliberal decentralization. Dussel's politics is Kantianism with a twist (yet, not necessarily a new twist). Rejecting what he considers to be Kant's inability to produce political normativity from ethical principles, Dussel attempts to link ethics and politics more tightly and practically by insisting on the interconnection of particular political praxis and universal ethical determinisms. Ethics provides us with universally normative principles, which are subsumed by political normativity. Political action, if not corrupted or fetishized, is an expression of the power of the people guided by universal ethical principles that shape the forms and aims of political struggles. This formulation, Dussel argues, endows Kantianism with necessary normativity, while avoiding Habermasian formalism or regressions into Machiavellian proceduralism. Dussel is at his weakest when he probes the borders of neo-Kantian ethical accounts of politics, community and political action as a way of exploring the territory of material and structural processes. Yet, the true value of this notable book is Dussel's skillful and generous attempt to situate his work in the context of a vibrant and complex theoretical field. Even if I disagree with his theses, the book nevertheless provided me with a series of "but wait a minute" moments that set up a process of productively rethinking my own lines of argumentation.

Mathias Nilges is an assistant professor at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia where he teaches 20th and 21st century American literature and critical theory. He has published articles on contemporary American literature, critical theory, post-9/11 U.S. culture and graphic novels in edited collections and journals such as *Mediations* and *Callaloo*.