



UNCERTAIN TIMES

JACQUES
RANCIÈRE

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
Part One: The Violence of Consensus	1
1 The New Racism: A Passion from Above	3
2 A Modest Proposal to Help the Victims	9
3 An Elusive Populism	12
4 Unravelling the Confusions Serving the Dominant Order	16
5 On Freedom of Expression	28
6 The Hatred of Equality	32
7 Fools and Sages: Reflections on the End of the Trump Presidency	42
8 A Golden Opportunity? Reflections in the Time of Lockdown	48
Part Two: Moments of Democracy	53
9 The Pandemic and Inequality	55
10 Interpreting the 68 Event: Politics, Philosophy, Sociology	69
11 Occupation	91

Contents

12	Nuit Debout: Desire for Community or Egalitarian Invention?	104
13	The Virtues of the Inexplicable: On the Gilets Jaunes	115
14	Beyond the Hatred of Democracy	120
15	Speech at the Assembly of Railway Workers	142
	<i>Notes</i>	144

Preface

This book brings together papers which were either published or delivered at conferences between 2010 and 2021. But the collection makes sense in a broader overview of the transformations that have affected our world since the end of the 1980s, with the break represented by the collapse of the Soviet system. Everyone can remember the speculations to which the end of the Cold War gave rise at the time. In 1991, Francis Fukuyama's best-selling book *The End of History and the Last Man* announced the coming of a world standardized and pacified by the joint reign of liberal economics and political democracy.¹ These predictions reflected the more widespread feeling that the era of ideologies and the deadly conflicts they engendered had passed: we had entered an age of realism when the dispassionate consideration of objective problems would give birth to a world at peace. This is what was called, in France, the 'consensus'.

We must now take stock of these promises and delve deeper into the nature and effects of the consensus. It is not only new ethnic wars and reawakened religious fanaticisms that have thwarted the peace which this

Preface

consensus promised. It is the consensus itself that has turned into its opposite, or rather revealed its truth, in the incredible scenario of the last American election when the president of the ‘greatest democracy in the world’ declared that the results of the elections were not what they were, and launched hordes of fanatics to storm the Capitol. At the same time, old Europe saw far-right parties take centre stage almost everywhere; their ideas spread very widely through the spheres of government, the media and the intellectual class.

The texts brought together in the first part of this book mark out the several stages of this reversal – which was also a consummation – of consensual realism. By following this line of argument, I have had to distance myself from what is currently a favourite way of marking out the present time: one that regularly sees exceptional events as opening up radically new eras. This was already the case with the collapse of the towers of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, interpreted at the time as a symbolic break that pushed us into a new era. More recently, the coronavirus pandemic has been analysed as the moment when the very balance between human beings and nature was disrupted, entailing a radical change in the civilizational paradigm. In both cases, however, we have seen how closely the ‘world after’ resembled the world before. The violence of Islamist terrorism and the violence of the virus were managed as external aggressions to which the governments of the communities affected reacted by using the means of protection already implemented in the ordinary state of consensus – that is, by reinforcing the feeling of identity, state security and the absolute authority of the experts. The handling of the exception was in accordance with the rule. This does not mean that we live in a ‘state of exception’ but, on the contrary, that the regular functioning of the dominant

Preface

machine has contrived to treat all disturbances, large or small, in the same way – a terrorist attack is treated like a fall in the stock market index, a pandemic like a street demonstration.

It is this ‘regular’ functioning of the consensual machine that the papers collected here analyse, marking out its manifestations and effects. In them, I show that the consensus is by no means the peace that it promised. Rather, it is the map of the territory on which new forms of warfare are being waged. Even before the publication of the book in which Francis Fukuyama hailed the global triumph of liberalism, the firestorm unleashed by the American armies in Iraq had shown what this triumph consisted of: the absolute equation of might and right, of the limitless expansion of power with a justice that George W. Bush, at the time of the second invasion of Iraq, would call infinite. Those who remember how this justice was demonstrated with lies borrowed from the propagandist arsenal of the so-called totalitarian powers (the corpses of infants snatched from the hospital and abandoned on the frozen ground, weapons of mass destruction targeting Western capitals...) will better understand how this sequence of a ‘liberalism’ out to conquer the world came to a climax with the deluge of lies in the name of which Donald Trump launched his militant troops against the headquarters of American representative power. Such is the logic of consensus. It proclaims its own version of peace, which has at its heart the equation between the power of wealth and the absolutism of right. It declares that the old divisions of political conflict and class struggle are obsolete. At the same time, it acknowledges only one form of alterity: the alterity of the outsider, the absolutely other – an empire of evil against which all violence is legitimate, or an absolute victim whose rights are appropriated without restraint.

Preface

It was in a slower, more sophisticated way that consensus developed its effects in old Europe. Not as the affirmation of a global civilizing mission but as the simple adherence to the necessary course of things. For that is what 'consensus' means: not the agreement that it is better to discuss things than to wage war, but the recognition that there is nothing to discuss because objective reality authorizes only one choice. The objective reality that imposed itself at the end of the 1990s was the reality of an absolutized and globalized capitalism to which each country had to submit. This 'no alternative' had initially been the winning formula of the counter-revolution led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. But almost everywhere in Europe, we saw formerly socialist parties endorsing it and recognizing it as the ineluctable order of things to which everyone had to adapt. And to this end it was necessary to liquidate any vestiges of the past which posed obstacles to it: workers' rights, labour laws, welfare systems, public services shielded from competition, etc. This attack on the achievements of decades of social struggle conveniently robbed the obsolescent Marxist tradition of its hard core: the faith in historical necessity. This had once meant that the very development of capitalism led to its self-destruction and to the advent of socialism. That is why Marxist thinkers stigmatized backward artisans attached to forms of the past which held back the forward movement of capitalism and the working class. Now it was the workers of this same working class struggling for the maintenance of their rights who were stigmatized as backward, defending archaic privileges to the detriment of future generations. On this basis, part of the left-wing intelligentsia came to support the efforts of right-wing governments and identified this 'archaism' with another 'backwardness', that of the nostalgia of a far right that was racist and

Preface

obsessed with questions of identity. These trends now merged into the same negative figure, 'populism', the supposed mode of expression of a lower class overtaken by modernity. That is how the alliance between the representatives of financial power and the representatives of science and enlightened opinion was sealed.

But the struggle of the new enlightenment against 'populist' backwardness needed to follow some rather tortuous paths. The parties of the reasonable consensus present themselves as a bulwark against the resurgence of the identity-based and racist far right. But this so-called opposition is actually complicity. Our consensual governments are removing all barriers to the free flow of capital. But when it comes to its reverse side, the other circulation of populations wishing to enjoy some share in the wealth accumulated in privileged countries, they establish an economic division of tasks: on the one hand, they take the administrative and policing measures necessary for containing the influx of undesirable populations (the Dublin Regulation, border police, the tightening of conditions for naturalization, etc.); on the other hand, they leave the imaginary management of this undesirability to the far right, whose natural specialty it is. But, at the same time, they claim to have stripped the far right of its weapons by showing that they themselves are better at fighting the enemy that nourishes the passions of the far right, namely immigration – a generic term subsuming all the problems posed by the populations from the former colonies and by new migrants driven out of their countries by poverty or violence. Thus a number of measures were taken which, on the pretext of depriving the far right of its hobbyhorse, continuously reinforced the figure of the unassimilable Other that the same far right brandished as a threat. Thus was constituted, in the guise of the struggle against dirty racism, the

Preface

'clean' figure of what I have proposed we call 'racism from above': a double-trigger racism where the open contempt of well-born people for the backward plebs is coupled with a fascination, at first discreet but nowadays exhibited in broad daylight, for the unapologetic racism attributed to those same plebs. The supposedly neutral figure of the security state, protecting the population against ever-present threats – an economic crisis, a recession, an epidemic, illegal immigration, Islamist terrorism – has never ceased, by its very operation, to reinforce this naked hatred of the Other that the state had claimed to disarm. The 'reasonable' consensus about adhering to the mere necessity of things has reached its consummation as a passionate economy of fear, exclusion and hatred.

But this consummation itself could be achieved only because it was endorsed by the very people who claimed to denounce the consensual order. One of the most striking aspects of the last decades, indeed, is the decisive contribution to right-wing powers and far-right ideologies made by large sectors of a left intelligentsia which has transformed its disappointed hopes into a formidable resentment against everything that had once fed those hopes. I have already mentioned how the Marxist faith in historical necessity and the denunciation of classes that clung to a bygone past were transformed into intellectual weapons against the workers engaged in a struggle for the defence of social gains. Subsequently, the providential notion of 'neoliberalism' made it possible to attribute the responsibility for the absolutization of capitalist power to the 'unfettered' freedom demanded by the featherbrained young rebels of May 1968, and more generally to the democratic aspirations to freedom and equality that were seen as expressing the mere desire to consume ever more commodities. In France, we saw many cases of

Preface

disappointed revolutionary ardour being converted into a 'republican' militancy of civic education against the fateful excesses of democratic individualism. But these excesses of democratic individualism would quickly take on an unexpected appearance: that of the young Muslim high school girl wearing a headscarf. Against this was brandished a master signifier of the French republic, namely secularism. This had long signified the neutrality of state schools in matters of religion. It was now given a new meaning: that of a virtue that individuals were obliged to manifest in their clothing so as not to risk designating themselves as outsiders to the republican community. Thus the distinguished racism of those in power and the vulgar racism of the far-right contrived to unite in the same exaltation of the republican ideal. The hatred of equality that dwelled in the former and the naked hatred of the Other that stirred up the latter were fused: in this way, the anti-capitalist or anti-racist militant and the fundamentalist killer ultimately became one and the same figure – the Islamo-leftist, a new spectre haunting the nights of the French political class.

The past thirty years have seen the fulfilment of the intellectual counter-revolution which either rejected all traditional progressive values or turned them into their opposite. The consensus, however, has failed to accomplish what was its very principle: to impose itself as the only reality, to be the sole way of defining the time and space of common life. The 'infinite justice' of the American armies and the hateful expansion of the consensual order have triggered a counter-response – movements such as democratic uprisings that started from peripheral places where the authority of dictatorial powers seemed unshakable (Ahmadinejad's Iran, Ben Ali's Tunisia, Mubarak's Egypt) and whose dynamic flowed back into Western capitals with the

Preface

occupations in Puerta del Sol in Madrid and Zuccotti Park in New York before spreading to Greece and France, Istanbul, Hong Kong, Santiago and many other places. Each time, the occupation of a space created a specific time, interrupting the reproduction of the time of domination. We know the fate of these movements: some were directly repressed by state violence, others were slowly diverted to serve other forces, and yet others were simply unable to survive in the long term. Some critics have taken this as an argument for reviving the old refrains condemning an ‘infantile revolt’ (as opposed to the adult order of reasonable politics) or a spontaneity without a program (as opposed to the long-term calculations of revolutionary strategy). These were two convenient ways of settling the question of political temporality. And the hackneyed contrast drawn between spontaneity and strategy conceals what the movements for the occupation of various city squares brought to light: political conflict is not only an opposition between forces endowed with divergent wills; it is an opposition between worlds – a world of equality and a world of inequality – involving different ways of constructing a common time and space. The movements to occupy city squares² lasted for only a few weeks or a few months. But they reminded us that the time of ‘adult politics’ – that of the representative order – is merely the reproduction of a system of domination closed in on itself. And it is also in this closed time, the time of the enemy, that so-called long-term strategies can find a place. These strategies, it is true, have long been based on a strong belief: the belief that the time of the dominators was itself included in a more fundamental time, namely the time of a historical evolution that would destroy the very dominations it had aroused, the time of a development of the productive forces that would end up burying the bourgeois class which had

Preface

unleashed them. However, if any powerful meaning emerged from the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the destruction of the industrial metropolises of the West, it was the bankruptcy of this belief. Time no longer endeavours – and, to tell the truth, has never endeavoured – to transform inequality into equality. Inequality and equality are two worlds locked in confrontation, at every present moment: the former is always already in place, with its well-oiled mechanisms, while the latter needs perpetually to be reconstructed. It is this naked conflict between worlds that reasonable or vindictive adults have sought to forget in two ways: some by transforming the revolutionary necessity into the mere necessity of the existing order, others by exercising their resentment against all the values which historical faith had supported.

The ephemeral movements of the occupied city squares were substantial enough in themselves to show that history worked neither for nor against anyone, and to strive to build, without history's help, a space and a time of equals. This involved a risk – the risk of having to confront in practical terms the contradictions that others repressed in a wide-eyed consent to the 'no alternative' or in the bitterness of infinite resentment. The protesters thus experienced the contradiction of a practice of struggle – namely occupation – borrowed from the time of the factory and from the arsenal of workers' struggles, but now orphaned of all that had given it strength: the power of the workers' collective brought together by the very system of domination, the power of this collective over the tools of this domination, and the anticipation of a new world of emancipated labour. They had to transfer this effective anticipation of a world of equality into the space of the street and into the fragile form of fraternal assembly, at the risk of reducing egalitarian struggle to the simple