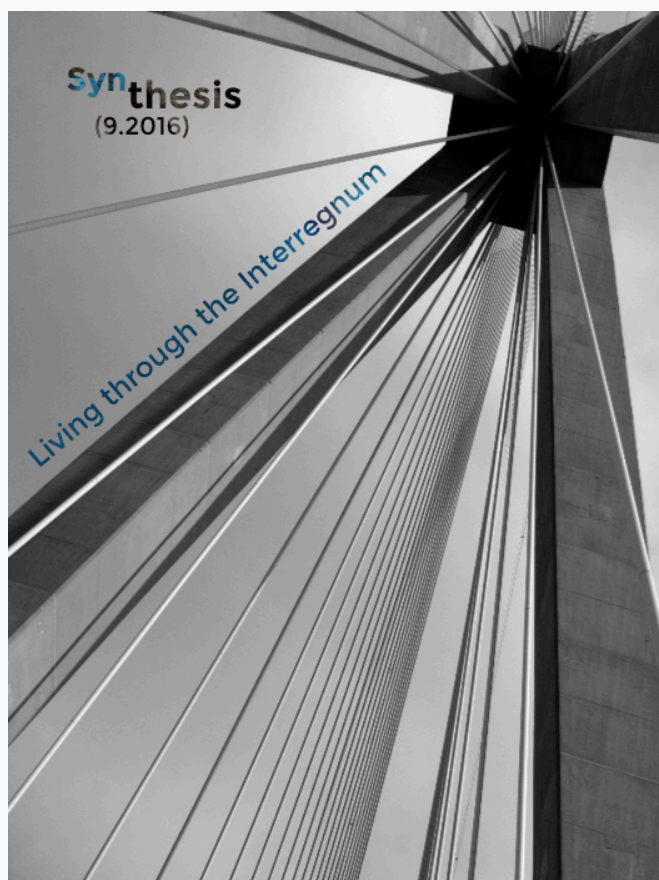


Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 9 (2016)

Living through the Interregnum



Democracy, Neoliberalism, and Resistance: an interview with Costas Douzinas

Maria Germanou, Costas Douzinas

doi: [10.12681/syn.16232](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16232)

Copyright © 2016, Maria Germanou, Costas Douzinas



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Democracy, Neoliberalism, and Resistance: an interview with Costas Douzinas

by
Maria Germanou

Maria Germanou: Let's begin with democracy and the belief, dominant in post-Marxist European left, that democracy needs to be 're-democratised.' For a long time, it was common belief that democracy was a form of government that had already been actualised; and yet nowadays this seems to have been a myth we wanted to entertain. What happened to people's celebrated sovereignty? Was democracy bound to be destroyed by its own relation to power and rule as the etymology of the word itself implies —has the *demos* been overruled by the *kratos*?

Costas Douzinas: The traditions of democracy and liberalism were lethal enemies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The early democratic and socialist ideas were promoted by trade unions, radical Christians and the reform movement. Liberalism on the other hand in its nineteenth-century *laissez faire* form was totally opposed to the extension of the franchise and any idea of social and economic rights. From Hobbes to Locke and Montesquieu, the liberals feared that if the 'plebs' and the 'undeserving poor' received the vote and acquired political power, they would abolish or seriously limit property, the basis, indeed the quasi-transcendental precondition of capitalism and liberal political institutions.

The compromise of the two traditions carried out in the inter-war period and more extensively after WWII was fragile. Its high point came in the late 1950s and 1960s when, in a period of relative economic prosperity, the social state was created partly as a result of the struggles of the unions under left social-democratic governments and partly as a concession by capital to prevent the radicalisation of the masses. When social democratic parties adopted neoliberal orthodoxies and moved to the 'centre' in the 1990s and 2000s, the compromise came under pressure. When the

wisdom of neo-classical economics and the markets is raised above the principles of democratic debate and political conflict, even our democracy-light retreats. The neoliberal credo is that economists and experts have all the answers to complex social and economic problems. In such case, the intervention of democratic decision-making can only introduce errors and inefficiencies. The belief that knowledge or science as well as the financial markets can give right answers discredits democratic decision-making, promotes party oligarchies and leads to corruption and citizen apathy.

I should add finally that the institutional idea of democracy, what we call liberal or parliamentary democracy and we see decaying now, is only one aspect of democracy. If democracy means the power of the people over all aspects of their existence, which is the real meaning of the *kratos* of the *demos*, and giving the law to yourself (auto-*nomy*), then non-representative forms or direct and participatory democracy should also have a major role in all aspects of life. Paradoxically as a result of the crisis, while parliamentary democracy is seen as impotent and retreating, these other forms are returning and are seen as alternative or supplementary forms to elections every four years. The total absence of alternative forms of popular participation may be coming to an end.

Currently 'people's sovereignty' is something of an ideological trope. The people are a discursive creation —called into existence by constitutions and laws and patriotic interpellations. They are having a material effect rarely, primarily only during elections. We are sovereign for the time limited regency period between the resignation of a government and the election of the new. The people do not exist outside its institutional constructions. The only instance when a population becomes 'people' in actuality outside of acts of interpellation and declaration is at these rare moments of *pouvoir constituant*. In a revolution or a case of massive resistance, the social space is split between 'us' and 'them' the elites, the capitalists, the one percent or whatever. At this point, a people is created. But the later constitutionalisation of constituent power moves people back to their 'normal' ghostly or discursive existence. So the Syntagma occupation¹ was a creation of a 'people' through its constituent counter-power. It gave perhaps a model for the way that a new set of institutions and even a new constitution may be constructed.

M.G.: The European Union working together with international monetary foundations nourishes a kind of global capitalism that seems to destabilise democracy even more. At the same time, the idea of a post-national Europe seems

to have failed and people resort to the alleged protection of nationalism. Do you believe that democracy nowadays is to be fought only at an inter-national level?

C. D.: All great ideas in modernity, from human rights to the nation and socialism, were advanced originally by intellectual and political elites but were able to inspire people, they were adopted and turned to action. This has palpably failed in Europe. Elites have become European, our colleagues, businessmen and politicians run to Brussels regularly to man various committees and get research and various other grants. The Brussels ‘commitology’ is one of the great sources of comic inspiration *de nos jours* but also of elite support, it has replaced the old masonic links and networks. The EU elite are the model cosmopolitans: they have the class consciousness of the first class frequent traveller.

But the people have not followed their ‘betters.’ They blame the disasters of neoliberal globalisation on the European Union and they feel that the remote eurocrats impose silly regulations and look after the interests of the powerful and rich. This is partly untrue, particularly before the triumph of neoliberalism. But at this point, it is impossible to start building a European *demos*, something that did not happen during the periods of prosperity when Europe was presented as the future of humanity. At this defensive period, the resources of social ethos that exist within communities, neighbourhoods, friend networks and families are extremely important. Of course, we have to combat nationalism particularly in its odious xenophobia and fascistic forms, but we cannot dismiss as easily today the local resources of ethical value and collective resistance.

The lesson of Tahrir, Syntagma and Taksim is that only localised situated and national of city-based resistances were able to achieve the few victories that we have had so far. The anti-globalisation movement followed the leader summits around the world. It was a great finishing school for a new generation of activists. But it did not achieve its aims. It was only when the new activists starting camping in local squares and attracting ordinary people who had never been ‘on the march’ that some victories were achieved. We must keep criticising the nation, its parochialism and its perversions and betrayals but, politically, we cannot do without the nation still.

M.G.: How do you account for the enduring supremacy of neoliberalism despite the numerous problems it has created worldwide. Have the failure of socialism,

both in the Third World and Eastern Europe, and the profound crisis of the social-democratic workers' movement put an end to any hope for a radical change?

C. D.: Neoliberalism is not just an economic dogma but a global ideology and world-view. It turns politics into the administration of economics. It disseminates a version of social 'normality,' which subjects all aspects of life to the logic of economic optimisation and a market-based distribution of goods, values and life prospects. The *homo economicus* becomes *homo tout court*. Everything is subjected to the market logic: the polity and the electoral system, health education and foreign policy as well as the constitution of the subject. The neoliberal project touches all aspects of life. We have to become entrepreneurs of our selves, see our body and mind as small businesses. Now all elite and dominant ideologies meet at some point certain desires of technology dominated classes. Neoliberalism turns the subject into a desiring machine and, during periods of economic boom, meets the desires it creates. The main problems with austerity is precisely that what ideology promised —indeed demanded, mandatory pleasure—is now interrupted. But the memory of the period of 'fat cows' remains and many people believe that the interruption will be temporary and we will then return to business as usual.

This is where perhaps the strategy of the Left has been most wanting so far. It has given sufficient reasons for people to believe that it will stop the disaster. But it has not started putting forward an alternative vision, let us call it for the moment a 'utopian' dream that the Left aims at. The wider technocratic turn has not left the leftists untouched. Radical change is again possible, the impossible of a few years back has become possible. Understandably there is no 'road map,' as everyone says using this rather ugly phrase. But regrettably there is not even the beginning of a poem or a science fiction novel about the contours of the alternative future.

M.G.: In your work concerning postmodern jurisprudence, like *Justice Miscarried* you turn to a philosophy of otherness to support the re-creation of the notion of justice. How are we to conceive of violence and justice in this relation with alterity. Levinas's ethical metaphysics poses the other as elementally Good involving an absoluteness within his view of relationality. The imperative 'thou shalt not kill' that he addresses doesn't this imply an infinite ethical responsibility that seems to be groundless? Our finitude situates us by necessity in a position of exposure to the violence of the other and vice versa.

C.D.: I don't fully agree with your point. The Levinasian other is not good or bad, he is just ineffable, unknowable, sublime. The temptation of temptation —the Greek vice for Levinas, I wish the Greeks had it today— is to try to know, to fully understand the other. You can't and you shouldn't. The other must be obeyed not understood. There is nothing more violent than having to respond positively and with hospitality to this monstrous otherness.

This figure of otherness —in Levinas's case of quasi-divine otherness— is one of the figures that philosophy developed in order to avoid the Hegelian dialectic. We have others formally homologous non dialectizable (what an ugly word) entities, the object, difference, *das Ding*, the punctum, the event etc. One characteristic of all these figures of absolute alterity is their violence, their undermining of pacification, the unravelling of the dialectic. The other I have to fully respond to, the other who takes me 'hostage,' is not a friendly other. This was the radicalness of Levinas but escaped its politically correct readings of the 1980s. Reading Levinas as a peacemaker, something that many did, was a mistake. The revival of his political texts of the 1950s and his attack on the Palestinians illuminate the position of otherness well. Whether a mistake or not however, the ethical turn of the 1990s is now well and truly over. After the retreat of politics in 1989 and the rise of the ethical turn, we tried to find moral resources that did not follow the neo-Kantian position and its humanitarian wars. Levinas's other was one such. But we need new figures of otherness now which indicate the enduring violence which was glossed over in the previous decades and is now becoming clearer.

M.G.: How can we accommodate the violent other in a reconsidered understanding of the signifier 'humanity' and 'democracy'?

C.D.: What the signifier 'humanity' and its ideological uses in terms such as human rights, humanitarianism etc. does is to make us forget that we are not all equally 'human.' In modernity, humanity introduces an element of universality at the normative level. It is a secularisation of Christian spiritual universalism. But historically, *humanitas* has been, since its invention by the Romans, a standard of distinction between the fully human, the lesser human and the inhuman. The *homines barbari* for the Romans, the pagans for the Christians, the irrational other for the moderns, i.e. those of the wrong gender, ethnicity, colour, religion, sexuality. All these figures of inhumanity have now been joined by the economically useless, the human debris, the one-use humans, those in our 'reception' centres, the unemployed young and old, and those who drown in the Mediterranean and the

Aegean turning them into floating graveyards. The most violent others are those who sustain these divisions and turn people into human refuse. With these people there can be no common humanity. Democracy, on the other hand, when it works, is an attempt to pacify this interminable conflict temporarily, but it will break out again. In a perfect instance of the trope chiasmus, the inhuman represent humanity today and the formally 'humans' manifest the baseness of humanity. Today to be really human, or for the human, you must adopt the inhumanity of camps, dingy boats and homelessness.

M.G.: In *Human Rights and Empire* you resort to a reconsidered form of cosmopolitanism in order to radicalise human rights, to defend their international and universal character which at the moment has only a rhetorical value. Can cosmopolitanism change human rights from agents of imperialism to agents of resistance? Consider this question especially in view of the recent events of biopolitical violence that attest to neocolonialism and neo-imperialism.

C.D.: At this point cosmopolitanism is just neoliberal globalisation with a human face. The World Social Forum and the alter globalisation movement were such globalised anti-globalisation resistances. However, they did not succeed. It was the change of location from the various places of the summit meetings to the squares of capital and major cities that resistance took off. Cosmopolitanism exists today in our cities and neighbourhood which defend the immigrants, the refugees, the excluded. If the *polis* indicates the place of belonging and the ethos of community; if the *cosmos*, the general or universal challenges to belonging, today the main challenges to our world dispensation start in the *polis*. In this sense, our *cosmos* today is the *polis*, in the sense that it promises the most radical challenge to the (globalised cosmopolitan) arrangement of power. The *polis* is a space of opening to the cosmos, the way in which finite existence opens to the infinite.

Now the related issue of universalism should be briefly addressed. Universalism is neither some substance, a set of norms or concepts (typically human rights), nor a totally ascetic form, Descartes' *cogito* or Kant's universalisation process. Standard symptomal analysis, Marxist or deconstructionist, shows how the 'universal' substance is prey to the hegemony of the dominant particular. The universality of form similarly is open to the intervention and cooptation of the dominant forces, reason becomes male reason, white mythology. No, the universal is to be found in the excluded particular, not in substance but in

subject. The particular is split between the human and the inhuman, there is a diagonal line that transverses both subjectivity and the social. When the particular takes on the position of the part of no part, when it denies and attacks the exclusion and destitution of the dominant forces, then it becomes universal, it becomes the concrete universal, the only universal that has a redeeming role. So the universal has to be embodied or embedded in a particular and this is the only way it acquires existence.

M.G.: In your book “Resistance and Philosophy in the Era of Crisis,” published in Greek, you visualise Europe’s survival at the symbolic field as a ‘Mediterranean to come,’ a place of hospitality, tolerance, a meeting place of several cultures as it used to be in the distant past. However, in the last decades it has been the sea in which several *sans papiers* have been drowned in their attempt to reach ‘democratic’ Europe. Given this shameful history, the reality of a global neoliberalism and the orientalist context within which North Europe sees the so called PIGS of the Mediterranean, what do you think saves or can save your vision from being a utopian vision. How are divisions between north and south or between classes across European countries to be addressed?

C.D.: What saves my vision, actually what makes this vision emerge is Tahrir, Puerta de Sol, Syntagma, Taksim. I have argued repeatedly that it is not the idea of equality, justice or communism that leads people to resist, to stand up to power and risk important goods including freedom and even life. It is the bodily and emotional response of ‘enough is enough,’ it cannot go any further. The idea of justice or communism survives only because people resist; it gets marginalised or even lost when it becomes just a matter of commentary and theoretical speculation. So this is not a utopian vision in the sense of something that has no purchase in reality and we keep it going out of a psychological need –as a counter to left melancholy. No it is precisely the happening of resistance all over the Mediterranean that has turned it again into the place where the non-place becomes again place. The dystopia of neoliberalism, orientalism, the turning of the sea into a floating graveyard finds its limit not in dreams –not just in dreams– but in the way that the dys- becomes u- in other words it is annulled and reveals a topos.

M.G.: The autonomous Cartesian subject has been heavily challenged by psychoanalysis and postmodernism and the latter has been repeatedly attacked for deconstructing the subject and thus rendering it politically impotent. On the other hand, others have claimed that opening the subject up to difference does not

invalidate it. As regards this issue, the reference point would be Levinas's ethical subject, a subject conceived only in relation of responsibility and responsibility to the other. If the primacy of the sovereign subject is a ghost of the past, is there a sense by which politics can be enabled by a vulnerable and dependent subject?

C.D.: I am not sure about that. I said a few things about this possible moralisation of politics above. The idea of the subject as vulnerable, victim or of a politics based on sympathy or 'empathy' —this recent bad American neologism— is highly problematic. Indeed you could say that a 'sympathetic politics is a philanthropy or anti-politics. Responsibility and response are matters of morality and perhaps they set certain limits that politics should not transgress. But there cannot be a ground or inspiration of politics. Politics is a condensation of social, economic and cultural conflict. It recognises the ever presence of conflict of force and of domination. In its best version, it helps pacify conflict temporarily before we return to it, since conflict is an inescapable condition.

I was one of the first few people, perhaps the first in legal philosophy to introduce the Levinasian alterity. I now recognise why: after 1989, the end of history, the humanitarian and human rights turn, many radicals, including me, accepted without necessarily admitting it that a politics of emancipation was perhaps finished. In other words, we fell for the end of history myth more readily than the right wing that always stays alert to the opportunities and difficulties of the situation. So we needed something to put against the neo-Kantian triumph in theory and the fake humanitarian humanistic turn. Otherness with its emphasis not on difference (that was being co-opted by identity politics and faux humanism) but on uniqueness and singularity gave the impression of a strong alternative. We stayed however in the dominant field of ethics, of a conception of politics as a version of defending the vulnerable and saving the victim. We were criticising what the Americans were doing in Iraq but we were adopting a similar approach albeit with a different concept.

M.G.: In any age of crisis, naturalisations dominant for decades collapse and 'democracy' may have been one of these naturalisations. However, soon new naturalisations are established. From the very beginning, the interpretation of the crisis and the austerity measures to address it were presented as a one-way street, thus annulling one of the advantages of (parliamentary) democracy which is its institutional legitimation of criticism. Criticism as the ultimate value of democracy is however also undermined by the dissatisfied people, though in a different way.

What dominates is the feeling of indignation against corrupt politicians and bankers. Can the indignant subject contribute to the 'return of the repressed,' that is, to political resistance?

C.D.: Absolutely. Spinoza validated first indignation as one of the most active, today we would say political, feelings. Whether indignation becomes anger or not whether it leads to action or not ('enough is enough,' I cannot take it any longer) depends on all kind of other considerations and relations. But without indignation, resistance remains an intellectual game, an ideological gambit not the wholehearted turn of the subject towards the overthrow of the policy, the balance of forces or the system of power. Affect and bodily engagement are central to resistance. I am not sure that they can be mobilised without outrage, indignation, anger and perhaps even hatred. These are strong emotions they can lead to resentment but without them in some measure no political baptism happens.

M.G.: Do you think that the citizen who practices 'civil disobedience,' that is, the citizen, as you have put it, that does not blindly follow the law but searches for the affinity between law, justice and ethics, constitutes the revolutionary subject?

C.D.: Civil disobedience is individual, resistance is collective.

Let me then state two laws or theses:

1. Resistance is a fact not an obligation, an *is* not an *ought*.

Resistance does not simply apply values and principles and does not have a predictable point of condensation and explosion. We don't resist in the name of something. It is not the idea of communism or equality or the theory of justice that makes us take to the streets. Resistance is the bodily reaction to an overwhelming sense of injustice, the almost irrepressible response to hurt, hunger, despair. Resistance may involve a vision of justice but this is not necessary, certainly not at the beginning. If the transformation of self, the main work of resistance, encounters the potential of transforming the world, then the historical trajectory may take a different route. Ideas are not the cause but the result of resistance. Resistance is born from the rubbing of one force by another. It is a matter of affect, passion and heart. While resistances involve choices and calculation, they are wild and strategic. Combine an exercise of will with a release of passions. We resist because 'enough is enough.'

2. Collective resistance becomes political and may succeed in radically changing the balance of forces when it condenses different causes, a multiplicity of struggles and local and regional complaints bringing them all together in a common place and

simultaneous time. Bodies coexisting in public spaces, in squares or streets help produce resisting subjectivities. Resistance to power exists everywhere and keeps transforming relations of power and subjectivities. Resistances go beyond their local, situated, regional operation and limited effectiveness, however, when they are compressed in their demands and concentrated in their appearance. The phenomenology of lived experience with its understanding of self as a concrete embodies and embedded being both subjected to power and resisting its manoeuvres. It is not rights of the legal or human variety that help resistance but the resistance and productivity of bodies.

M.G.: Antigone holds a central position in your work. How can it inspire us to imagine and practice a revolutionary politics today within the restrictive conditions in our barely livable daily reality.

What Antigone does in an unsurpassed way is to show through language and action what resources can lead people to resistance all the way to death. The (transgression of) law, the clash of laws (this is typical of all tragedy of course), gender roles, the demands of intimacy and sexuality, the call of jouissance. Antigone tells us that resistance is always situated in a Thebes, a family comedy, a political situation but also has certain common structural characteristics. This is what turns Antigone into a classic and the maiden herself into the most beautiful woman ever to walk the earth, as Hegel says.

¹ Syntagma square at the centre of Athens was the place where thousands of people gathered during the Spring of 2011 to protest against the austerity measures introduced by the Parliament whose building is located at that square.