

Dispositions

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Our brief is to tackle several questions: “Whose society does critique engage with today? In what modes does it do so, and under what conditions? Who is speaking to, with and for whom? On what models of participation and exclusion do these exchanges depend? And how, in the frictional mess of today’s social, is speaking truth to power still feasible?” Remark on our prepositions: “with,” “in,” “under,” “to,” “for.” I’m going to work from Hall and Arendt—from a spot where they would appear to disagree—toward a couple of theses regarding position, preposition, and disposition in the work of critique today. An intuition: the work of politics in the increasingly discontinuous field of information-extraction capital is the work of prepositioning (a battle over prepositions rather than, say, over substances or their surrogates, pronouns and subject positions). What would this mean? What would it entail, strategically and practically? It’s not obvious, but surely it means that we should no longer take “position” to mean “subject position” or, *a fortiori*, a particular identity. If we put the accent on the *prepositional*, we are un-stressing the nouns, substances, etc. On the positive, programmatic side, probably (the first: what this would mean) a full-on engagement with what (following Simondon, and against a formalistic version of the matter in Carnap) we’d call, with Balibar, an ontology of *relation*. And regarding the second, strategy and practice, it would mean placing institutions (differently conceived than as instruments for the expression of the truth of substances or their proxies) *prior to* whatever-interests they are supposed to administer.

Stuart Hall offers, as a condition of understanding politics as a “war of positions” and in order to have access to “a language of sufficient explanatory power at our command with which to understand the institutionalisation of power in our society and the secret sources of our resistances to change” today (late 1980s, but the analysis is surprisingly fresh), three conditions. He is diagnosing the state of affairs on the Left, and using the current metaphor of “new times” as his main device. To make it more “likely” that a politics will be able to “command the new times,” this politics should (the argument is normative) meet these three conditions:

1. We have to make assessments, not from the completed base, but from the ‘leading edge’ of change;
2. [We have to] attend to the ways in which gendered identities are formed and transformed, and how they are deployed politically;
3. [We have to attend to] new forms of ethnicity [] articulated, politically, in a different direction [than other, earlier forms of ‘ethnicity’]. By ‘ethnicity’ we mean the astonishing return to the political agenda of all those points of attachment which give the individual some sense of ‘place’ and position in the world, whether these be in

relation to particular communities, localities, territories, languages, religions or cultures.

The last two points of Hall's argument call for what has largely come to pass in academic culture since his essay appeared—the adoption of positional thought, localized thought, of thoughts signed in the first-person: here and now, from my position *as* X or Y, I make this or that judgment concerning the “new times” that we (that is, I and other ‘I’s’ I hypothesize, from this position I occupy, to be like me in ways I can imagine, enumerate, theorize, etc.) are living.

Two matters are immediately striking: the first norm, that assessments (and, presumably, judgments based on these) have to be made from the “leading edge” of change. And second, more generally, that “commanding” the “new times” operates in a register—the register of sovereignty and power—not obviously and never immediately identical to the register on which “assessment” and “judgment” operate—that is, the register of truth. (Also recall that judging whether we are on the “leading edge,” and in what direction we are traveling if so, are matters, Hall says, of “assessment.”) I can “command” from this or that position without it being required that my assessments or my judgments be true: they have just to be more forcefully articulated, defended or promoted with greater violence or coercion, or marketed more successfully. These two matters—the status, with regard to the second norms (which concern particular identities and emplacements), of the first norm, which has to do with assessing rather the movements of society or history; and the exclusion from all three, in different ways, of the register of truth—seem to me decisive. Hall courts a radical cultural relativism that cannot square with his normative claims.

Here Arendt is at hand. I take from her essay the extraordinary insight that claiming access to what I was calling the “register of truth” is not, cannot be, should not be, in itself a *political* position. This doesn't mean, for Arendt, that politics is nothing but *doxa*, or that it is the domain of falsehood or of the forgetting of truth. It helps us to understand, I take it, that when Hall calls post-Thatcherite politics a “war of position” he is imagining in part and in addition to the internecine wars waged over competing interests by different classes, ethnicities, claims, etc., a general war over the ways (techniques, devices, institutions) in which the non-position of the claim to the register of truth, as truth-not-in-relation, is excluded from the city. For Arendt, the philosopher, rusticated from the city, a sort of *pharmakon*, marks its outside and is then what permits it an interamural consistency: by exiling the speaker of truth-not-in-relation, the relative truths that constitute politics within the walls of the city can take shape, be argued, even be *true*. (I see lines connecting this analysis with Agamben obviously, and much more interestingly with the very late Foucault.)

Hall's and Arendt's diagnoses seem to me just off—Hall's, in that it ends up in self-contradiction (on its normative and descriptive claims) and in cultural relativism, and lacks a

sufficient account of how its own truth-claims can be assessed; Arendt's, in that it ends up advocating the heroism of reason, and granting the speaker-of-non-relational-truth the truly sovereign position of being the pre-condition of political association. Again, a sort of contradiction faces us: the non-position of the philosopher as Arendt imagines it is the condition of political speech, on the condition that its unconditionality (I want to mean by this: its non-relationality) be excluded from the city. The unconditional exclusion of the unconditional is the condition on which political speech emerges. (I see a line connecting this analysis to Benjamin and Derrida's work.)

Here are three questions, which should serve as polemical suggestions as well—and, I think, provide also some sorts of answers to the questions we're charged to address.

Can we imagine a critique of the logic of positions (subject-positions, interest-positions, identities) that has recourse to the register of truth, without either relativizing it or making it, heroically, the exiled unconditional condition of political speech? Not, I think, without the hypothesis that the truth of relations precedes, paradoxically, the identities (substances etc.) of which relations are usually thought to be predicated. Prepositional.

And: what institutions (and what concept or concepts *of* institution) would be required to bring into political speech this hypothesis, and all that it entails? These would be institutions whose substance and identity, whose relation-to-time—all these—are effects of both praxes *and* unconditional claims, which is to say that they would be paradoxical and defective institutions whose borders both include and exclude the register of truth.

And finally, a sort of double question: what are the consequences of reimagining the truth, relative and unconditional, of political positions at a time when environmental catastrophe seems to make collective action—the taking of a common position in the face of disaster—urgently needed? Neither Hall nor Arendt saw just this, though global conflict is on Hall's mind and the Cold War on Arendt's. Is the position of assuming a pre-positional disposition toward primary relations *ethical* in the face of a catastrophe requiring explicit political collectivity? I'll leave that question open.