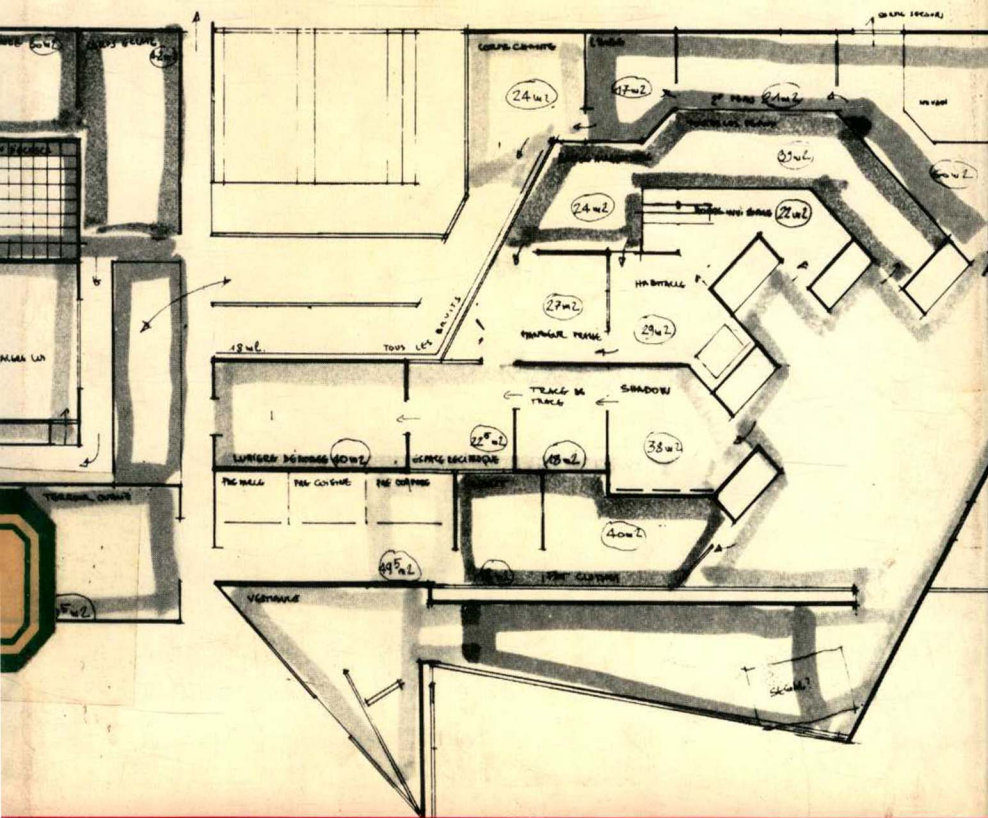


John Rajchman

PHILOSOPHICAL EVENTS

ESSAYS OF THE '80s

RORTY



John Rajchman
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PREFACE

The '80s was a decade of rethinking, revision, regrouping. Following a crisis in global utopian ideals, there arose a debate about the very nature and tradition of critical thought, and its relation to the Enlightenment and to Democracy. Three new kinds of philosophy confronted one another: "neopragmatist," "poststructuralist," and "communications-theoretical," and their confrontation served to redraw the old geographical map that had made of the Atlantic or the Channel a philosophical divide. At the same time there arose a debate over new forms of art and culture in a period of electronic technologies and a triumphant consumerism. A new label was invented, "postmodernism," coined in America, but soon to have currency almost everywhere.

In all these controversies we may perhaps discern an attempt, fraught with uncertainty and many antagonisms, to find again in the historical events of the Enlightenment, or Democracy, or Modernism in European culture, a new starting point for something as yet unfinished in our traditions. For we examined those events in new ways and from new angles, and sought in them not "the end of history," but a new start within it. We were concerned not with the ending of a great story, but with events in a complex history;

Preface

events which we may not yet know how to name, but which come “after” Stalinism, Fascism, and the War, in a “postmodern” world. It is the chance or possibility of such events in the history in which we find ourselves, which supplies the central question of these essays.

This book owes much to Foucault. I develop what in an earlier book I called his “historical nominalism” in terms of a reflection on what an *event* is. In his work Foucault held to a “principle of singularity,” which simply says that “there are events in thought.” It was this principle that guided his questioning of our inherited ways of being. Foucault wanted to open the space of a critical questioning that would be prior to who, at a time and place, we think we are, universally, necessarily, transcendently, or teleologically. What seems “universal” about our experience would not be what accounts for what we think or do, but what needs to be critically accounted for in it. Thus Foucault proposed to regard the “discourses” through which we think and act as *events* of a particular kind. To expose such categories of our experience as our “sexuality” or our “deviancy” as singular events in our thought, was to help open the critical but undetermined possibility of other conceptions—to start up again the history of our own self-conceptions, to “eventalize” that history and ask again, “who are we today?”

Even Foucault’s last and literally unfinished work had this critical aim: to understand our ethical “practices of the self” as events, and to ask what new ways of speaking critically of ourselves, what new sorts of “spirituality” are open to us today. “. . . to rethink the Greeks today consists not in valorizing Greek morality as the domain of morality *par excellence* which one would need for self-reflection, but in seeing to it that European thought can get started again on Greek thought as an experience given once, and in regard to which one can be totally free.”¹

The conception of “event” that runs throughout this series of overlapping essays from the ’80s is of this “nominalist” sort. An event is not, something as Aristotle thought, a narrative sequence of words and deeds occurring within a setting and organized by a plot. It is rather a moment of erosion, collapse, questioning, or problematization of the very assumptions of the setting within which a drama may take place, occasioning the chance or possibility of another, different setting. It is thus like those turning points in a tragedy that suspend the drama and the world its protagonists

inhabit, as when Shakespeare says, "time is out of joint"; it is like those events in a drama which take the drama itself as an event. It is not defined by a fixed beginning and end, but is something that occurs in the midst of a history, causing us to redistribute our sense of what has gone before it and what might come after. An event is thus not something one inserts into an emplotted dramatic sequence with its start and finish, for it initiates a new sequence that retrospectively determines its beginnings, and which leaves its ends unknown or undetermined.

We ourselves are not prior to events of this kind. They are on the contrary just those occurrences which cause us to ask again what we might still become. But while events thus question our identifications, our "solidarities," the agreements on which our practices rest, they do not confront us as a crushing fate or necessity. On the contrary, they expose that something we previously took to be necessary in fact no longer is. They appeal to our freedom. The experience of freedom is an experience of events, an experience not of what we must be or do, but of new possibilities of being and doing. The task of a critical intellectual is then to "see," to expose, to analyze these events that happen to us in the midst of our histories, freeing the space for other histories. It is a task that requires a critical use of history to save us from the historicism that asks us to return to the past and the progressivism that tells us what must come in the future. But the question of events is also the question of the invention of ourselves. It requires the creation of new spaces, of new "forums," for reflection and analysis, in which to open again the possibilities of what we may think, do, or be.

The events of 1968 and those that are happening in Eastern Europe as I am writing have been called "revolutions." And yet they are not so like what happened in 1789 or 1917. Rather they cause us to ask again what those "revolutions" were. They cause us to see them not so much as stories with a beginning and an end, but as events from which to start again something as yet unsettled. Perhaps we might see 1968 (with its new questions about women and the relations between the sexes, about minorities and racism, about deviancy and normality, the environment and technology), and 1989 (with its new questions about the ideals of socialism and the historical constitution of the warfare-welfare nation state) as dates not of the process of Revolution, but, in their relations with one another, as dates of those unforeseen events that change our

Preface

historical sense, and so call for the exercise of our critical intelligence.

NOTES

1. "The Return of Morality," in *Foucault Live* (Semiotext(e), 1989), p. 325.

CONTENTS

Preface	<i>vii</i>
I. PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS	
1. Translation without a Master	3
2. Habermas' Complaint	24
II. A STYLE OF PHILOSOPHY	
3. Foucault the Philosopher: Ethics and Work	57
4. Foucault's Art of Seeing	68
III. THE HISTORY OF A CATEGORY	
5. The Postmodern Museum	105
6. Postmodernism in a Nominalist Frame	118
IV. ART AND ARCHITECTURE	
7. Duchamp's Joke	129
8. What's New in Architecture?	152

Part I

PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS

ONE

Translation Without a Master

TRADITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

In recent years, there has been lots of dispute in philosophy about philosophy itself—its aims, its history, its social and political responsibilities, and the sort of relation it has to other kinds of discourse, aesthetic, scientific, or political. With this discussion has gone the sense of the end, or dead end, of one kind of philosophy or another, even sometimes of philosophy itself as we have known it.

These disputes have not been restricted to one country or one kind of philosophy. In particular they have accompanied changes in three different traditions: (1) the changes in English-language philosophy Cornel West and I provisionally termed “post-analytic philosophy”; (2) the changes in German language philosophy associated with a second generation of critical theorists, notably Habermas, and (3) the changes in French-language philosophy that have collectively come to be known as “poststructuralism.” In each of these cases the question of philosophy itself has been raised, and an attempt been made to revise or renew its history.

This lecture was given at a symposium, “Philosophy and Translation,” organized by David Wood, University of Warwick, July 1988. Proceedings forthcoming from Routledge Press.

More recently still, we have witnessed among the three a series of exchanges, clashes, critical readings and misreadings, confrontations and adaptations that have cut across the Rhine, the Channel, and the Atlantic. They raise the question of whether there has been, if not a break-up then a loosening or reshuffling of the boundaries geographical, historical, or linguistic, that not so long ago seemed to divide up contemporary philosophy. I am not saying that people are not, or should not be, continuing to work in the traditions or with the problems thought to be delimited by these boundaries. On the contrary, the more original work that is done in these traditions, the richer the possibilities of exchange or of interference among them. Nevertheless I think there has been a sort of "de-nationalization" of philosophical work. There is now analytic philosophy done in German and French, and critical theory or deconstruction done in English. Habermas' work is now in many respects closer to Rawls or Peirce than it is to Derrida, who, for his part, has helped to initiate new readings in French of Adorno and Benjamin—authors who formed Habermas' thought. Similarly there is a whole aspect of Foucault's work that is closer to Kuhn than it is to Husserl, Hegel, or even Nietzsche, and another aspect closer to Weber than it is to Sartre or Derrida. With these realignments has gone the sense that the story of contemporary philosophy itself might be retold—the way it took shape in the '30s, the divisions that were established after the War, the way new directions emerged in the '60s, and the way in the '80s these changes came to confront one another. In any case, the three authors I will consider, Habermas, Rorty, and Foucault, have each reflected on this complex contemporary history, and defined his work in terms of it.

To put a date on it, the phase of confrontation and exchange may be said to have started about ten years ago, in '78 or '79. Nineteen seventy-nine was the date of *The Postmodern Condition* of Lyotard. It was the date of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* of Rorty. And it was at this time as well that Habermas began his essays about modernity, and Foucault his reflections on the question of enlightenment. Nineteen seventy-eight was also the date of a work less well known than these: *The Literary Absolute* of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe. This book was, or contained, a translation in the ordinary sense—a translation of the fragmentary writings of the Jena Romantics, and it initiated a series of translations into French of works from the post-Kantian literary and philosophical

traditions of Germany. But the book might also be said to be a sort of "philosophical translation" in the genealogical style which asks what the event of Romanticism means for who we are today. In this respect it is linked to Rorty, who, of course, presents us with pragmatism as the "successor-movement" to Romanticism.

Worries about the nature of philosophy, pronouncements that one strain or another is at an end, rivalrous exchanges among contemporary kinds—all this is not new. It is quite normal in philosophy. New objects of discussion, new styles of argument or analysis are invented, and the question arises of how they are related to other ones, in the past or in the present. A new philosophy attacks fresh problems, applying to them fresh concepts, which discover new sorts of application. In what does this novelty consist, and how does one pass from the old to the new? by a radical refusal and a new beginning? by a subsumption in a higher synthesis or superior method of analysis? or by a rediscovery of something forgotten that promises a recommencement? Such are the questions of the unity and the history of philosophies, and they are raised anew today.

For Habermas, Rorty, and Foucault may each be said to advance a new way of doing philosophy, even if it is one others say is not new or not philosophy. Each tells a story in which there is a break in the tradition, or the ending of something in it, and each uses his story to say something about the others. Thus there is common ground, even if the novelties, the stories, and the exchanges are quite different or even at odds with one another. We may thus ask whether there is an event of which the three, in their differences, participate—a sort of "crisis" of which each may be read as offering a different "diagnosis"; and further, we may wonder whether this crisis is a creative one, whether it itself will produce anything new.

Since the heyday of the philological study of antiquity, translation between languages had regularly been used to conceptualize the changes in the history of philosophies. An analogy is set up between translation and the sorts of interpretative relations a new philosophy would have with others, past or present. If, for example, we suppose a radical disunity of philosophies, and radical dissociations in its history, then it is said that there can be no "translations" in philosophy at all. For then there would be no common ground, no "common sense." To translate is by definition to suppose some common ground between the two languages of the trans-

lation. If it is sense that translation preserves, where there is translation, there can be no *altogether* new sense. There is always some sense in common.

But novelty may be regarded in terms of an "anomaly of sense." There is anomaly when one comes across something that "problematizes" the assumptions with which one normally proceeds. In particular, an anomaly can cause us to question those presumptions which we would otherwise never give up in translating. Interpretive relations among different philosophies old and new might thus be modeled on this situation where there arises in a translation something undecipherable by the conventions used to translate, which opens those conventions themselves to revision. Two philosophies may then be said to be "incommensurable" when their confrontation with each other leads to such an anomaly. And such incommensurability may be said to be "creative" when it gives rise to something new.

There is thus another sense of "common sense," or of what is common in a "philosophical translation." It is put in an empiricist fashion by Paul Feyerabend when he says that the public would be best off if it let there be a proliferation of incommensurable traditions. Proliferation is not a matter of a classifiable plurality that is tolerated. The disunity of traditions is dynamic. We will never yet know what new traditions may come. The question then arises of whether there is not a way of letting two or more traditions interfere with one another, bringing them together at just those incommensurable points where they diverge. Does there exist a mode of thinking in which two traditions are so linked as to expose in a new way what differentiates them, or in which, as it were, it is their difference that they have in common? To this question belongs another. Can there exist a common sense, a public, or public space—a *glasnost*—which is not identified with a single tradition, or with a single way of classifying the plurality of traditions, but which is so divided up that each tradition remains exposed to the singularities of the others, and of those yet to come? Can there exist a philosophical community not based in the assumptions of an overarching unity?

If one then *starts* with an anomaly or a problematization in one's thinking, marking an "incommensurability" with others past or present, one finds oneself in a situation where the language *into* which one will end up translating will never be identical to the one with which one starts. Such would be the creative situation of what

might be called "translation without a master." And this lack of mastery, this freedom might be contrasted with, and used to analyze, two other situations or images of translation: that of *fidelity*, where the other is the master and the problem is one of identification with his word; and that of *charity*, where one can't help being oneself the master, and the problem is the altruistic one of knowing what should be, or should have been, good or true for the other. For it is the freedom of translation that allows us to discern the obsessional side of fidelity (no other set of words can ever be adequate to that of the master) and the autistic side of charity (nothing in the words of the other can alter the basic representations one uses to identify oneself). Conversely, translation without a master would be the art of breaking with those with whom one nevertheless identifies, while exposing oneself to the singularities of those one nevertheless tries to understand. Put more pointedly, my question is then whether our current situation of clash and exchange is, or may be regarded as, such a creative or open situation of the lack of a philosophical master, and whether it might therefore be productive of something new.

HABERMAS' MODERNITY

Habermas' lectures on the philosophies of modernity advance a new history of what has happened since Kant. The motivation for it, he says, came from the challenge of the "neostructuralists." By that he means the writings of such people as Foucault and Derrida, primarily from the '60s and early '70s. He proposes to meet the challenge by inserting this work within a discourse comprising the various attempts to justify "modern" society and articulate its fundamental divisions, without any reference to "tradition." His central claim is that such "discourse of modernity" has been constitutive of philosophy since at least Hegel, who derived it from the version of the conflict between the ancients and the moderns propounded in the German aesthetics of the eighteenth century. That the French authors in question never viewed their work in terms of this "discourse" is the mark of the novelty, or incommensurability, that comes from Habermas' confrontation with them.

In inserting the French into this new story of post-Kantian thought, Habermas is not much interested in what they say about themselves, or the contexts from which their work arose. Indeed the very category of "neostructuralism" is a curious if familiar one.

Nobody has ever called *himself* a neostructuralist, especially not in France where neostructuralism would have been born. And when Habermas goes on to say that the French neostructuralists resemble the young or neo-conservatives of Germany, he is inadvertently as informative about the German context in which the French authors have been read as about the authors themselves.

For there is a general principle of Habermas' revised history. Nothing *new* has been added by the French philosophers to the German philosophers who preceded them. Just where Foucault or Derrida thought they were making a new departure from post-Kantian thought, Habermas says they were only repeating it. Thus he declares "Derrida wants to go beyond Heidegger, fortunately he goes back behind him";¹ and of Foucault's "ingenious" discussion of the "anthropological slumbers" of modern philosophy, Habermas says that it was "already analyzed by Schiller, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel in a similar fashion."² It follows that the French thinkers are only weak or belated "translations" of an earlier German philosophy. What is new is rather the ending of the tradition to which the French have contributed nothing.

In Habermas' new story there is a basic question: how today to "reassure" ourselves philosophically or to define who or what we are in philosophical terms. The question arises at a particular time—that of "modernity," or when ancient or speculative sorts of self-definition are no longer available to us. And then there is a bad way of responding to the question: in terms of "subject-centered reason," or when people define themselves with a philosophy of consciousness, or with a theory of any sort of subject that would alienate or produce or realize itself in history.

It is Habermas' view that until his own "universal pragmatics," virtually all the philosophers of modernity set out on this bad "road" even though, at what Habermas calls the "crossroads" in their thinking, we now see they need not have. It is here that we find Habermas' version of the theme of the end of philosophy. He says the various versions of subject-centered reason have all gone nowhere, ending in bankruptcy or insoluble difficulties. The moral of the story is that subject-centered reason is no reason at all.

Habermas' story is thus self-centered. It issues in and so justifies his own views. At the same time it presupposes them. This is what might be called "Habermas' circle" and it helps explain the sometimes bombastic exhilaration of having found the solution to a problem that bedeviled all the rest of modern philosophy. This

"self-assurance" matches with the central problem it defines: the *lack* of philosophical self-confidence characteristic of modernity. The core of what Habermas says we moderns have always needed to reassure ourselves is an intersubjective transcendental philosophy, and the institutions of social democracy, the first supplying the philosophical grounding for the norms of the second—just what Habermas himself is now prepared to offer us.

Armed with this self-assuring insight into the self-defeating character of much of modern philosophy, Habermas concludes that we must now set some limits on any critical questioning of ourselves and our tradition. We must never again question ourselves without instancing and defending an intersubjective norm of judgment. For to do otherwise is to fall prey to just the sort of "aestheticism" through which the tradition was led astray. And that is precisely the danger and the predicament of Foucault, Derrida, and the other unnamed neostructuralists. Foucault is a "cryptonormativist," Derrida an "aesthetic decisionist," and as such these philosophers court two dangers the tradition has exposed. There is the danger of anti-liberalism (they can't question the tradition as they do and support democratic struggles), and a danger of irrationalism (they can't question the tradition as they do, and retain their reason, or continue to "communicate"). Thus to the degree that Foucault and Derrida are prepared to support the achievements of enlightened democracy, Habermas says they must be contradicting themselves. With this danger of an anti-democratic irrationalism one senses that one is close to an event and a fear that fuels Habermas' revised account of the tradition—the event and the fear of fascism.³

In short, the sort of exchange with the neostructuralists Habermas works out in his lectures on modernity might be said to be informed by an agenda that could be put in some such terms as these. The evil of German fascism has shown us the dangers of "subject-centered reason." Since Kant, a central source of this dangerous kind of reason has been the great philosophical histories of modernity, and it is now urgent that we purge this tendency from the inheritance of German philosophy. So far one has a view that would be familiar to many American analytic philosophers who are also liberals. But Habermas adds: in Paris the lesson of modernity has not been learned; there the dangerous influence of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Freud continues to flourish. Thus the French have become the bad Romantic Germans, and it now falls to the