

The ‘Complications’ of Domination: A Critique of the Problematics of Intentionality

INTRODUCTION

Tackling head-on the issue of intentionality provides us with a complementary perspective and allows us to advance in the analysis of the practices of domination. Intentionality lies at the heart of the way the political is understood by people acting in a given society, as illustrated by the widespread nature of explanations in terms of plots and secrets; it is also at the center of analyses of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, and emerges from questions about the responsibility of the ‘chief,’ of the ‘leaders,’ of the police, the single party or a particular category of the population in acts of repression. Intentionality also informs questions about the role of a policy or a measure in the exercise of domination, in the imposed (or conversely accepted) character of control, the place of coercion and the use of force. Even if it is rarely made explicit, the intentionalist hypothesis underlies the analysis that ‘politicizes’ the games of players, who think in terms of bribery and compensation, highlight the capacity for instrumentalization and adaptation of regimes in place, and try at all costs to find explanations for historical situations. The attention paid to the practical dimension of economic dispositifs, the detail of effective procedures of domination and the practices of actors leads to a much more ambiguous conclusion. On the one hand, it is impossible to deny the fundamental role of the ‘chief’ or ‘top leaders,’ the often extreme centralized nature of the political and administrative organization, the arbitrariness of decisions handed down ‘from above,’ the intensive use of police techniques, and the desire to control and intrude into private life. On the other hand, however,

the analysis of everyday life suggests the tangibility of compromise and negotiations—and thus of the intentions of other people, with their own, indeed independent logics—as well as the element of contingency and inevitable improvisation, and the possibility of escaping political influence, if only through detachment and indifference, and therefore also the existence of room for maneuver and the exercise of freedom alongside constraints, demonstrations of force or even the use of violence.

It is therefore important to extend our analysis of the 'complications'¹ that can account for this everyday reality. I would now like to show this concretely through a critical examination of several economic forces and configurations, trying to think the situation through in terms other than contradiction and paradox. To do this, I have adopted an analytical approach that considers power to be the result of interactions: it is relational, and thus domination can be exercised only through mutual dependencies, the balance of forces, games of power and social relations. This is the counterpart of the cautious attitude to 'big words' (Michel de Certeau) mentioned above, which pays attention to practical and empirical situations. It is also very Weberian: the universal reflections and the rising level of generality developed by the author of *Economy and Society* always stemmed from extremely accurate and concrete research. Weber has always insisted on this approach: 'It is always by the demonstration and solution of problems of *substance* that new sciences have been established and their methods further developed; on the other hand, purely epistemological or methodological considerations have as yet never played a crucial role in those respects.'² Again, contrary to what is often emphasized, this approach is not far from that of Karl Marx when he says that it is not general entities that lie at the basis, for example, of contradictions and laws, but specific realities, defined and unique, so that everything happens in concrete experience.³

The desire to consider concrete, singular and historically situated states of affairs requires us, first, to highlight the role of practices, games and interpretations of actors, the unexpected factors that arise simultaneously from shifts in time, uncontrollable chains of decisions, the ambiguity of situations, and the plurality of meanings; in short, a whole series of mechanisms that mean that voluntarism is often illusory, the concrete dispositifs of domination have not necessarily been conceptualized as such, 'participation' in domination is not necessarily intentional and control is never absolute. To do this, it is important not to take utterances for reality, including voluntarist discourses on population control, mastery of the

situation, the effectiveness of action, the performativity of statements—all of which are characteristic postures of authoritarian situations. In other words, it is important ‘not to trap words’⁴ by assuming that a statement necessarily produces what it states. This does not mean contrasting discourses and practices, discursive utterances and social impact, but putting them into perspective in a way that is not necessarily causal. Words, indeed, are sometimes uttered as defining elements of the configuration of behavior. Yet, most often, the relationship between them is more complex and requires a further elaboration of words and utterances. In his writings on history, Paul Veyne called this elaboration a ‘veil of words’:⁵ we cannot take people at their word although it is important to take their words and what they say seriously, insofar as, far behind their words, there exist practices that are indubitably at work. Marcuse had previously come up with some similar ideas when he insisted that we cannot take literally what people say, ‘not because they lie, but because the universe of thought and practice in which they live is a universe of manipulated contradictions.’⁶ Words and concepts thus appear as a ‘figurative language’⁷ pointing to something else, which requires that practices, in all their multiplicity, are taken into account: this method is all the more necessary if we are to analyze voluntarism, actions and decisions taken in the name of the state and the general interest, since in authoritarian situations the governing classes most often present themselves as demiurges, as omnipotent and omniscient actors. Relativizing the intentional nature of the exercise of domination gives another scope to utterances: it means they now reveal values, ideas and disparate and contradictory justifications, and highlight the variety of possibilities, motivations, intentions and constraints.

Second, going beyond the problematics of intentionality requires that the analysis focus less on the result (the absence of opposition, consensus, the stifling of conflict, genocide, police repression) than on the processes by which it happens, the life behind the immobility or the stabilized situation. This is what Michel de Certeau has long encouraged us to do, analyzing everyday ‘ways of making’ so as to clarify the ‘ways of operating,’ the ‘schemata of action’ and the ‘systems of operational combination’ at work.⁸ This means taking into account the construction of improvisations, tips and tricks, not as anecdotes and deviant practices, but as the very foundation of practices and actions; and it especially means understanding how daily life is invented by the ‘thousand ways of poaching’ deployed by users, consumers, the ‘lowest of the low,’ the little people, and more generally all those who, without being passive or docile, are nevertheless

more 'dominated' than 'dominant.' It is, in other words, to use very concrete and detailed analyses as a basis for identifying the terms in which everyday life is 'manufactured' and thus the relations of power specific to these 'dominated' populations, relations which do indeed stem from strategies and power relations defined by the dominant, but are no less autonomous and particular, following their own logics and even able to comprise an 'antidiscipline' by 'vampirizing,' 'subverting,' 'appropriating' and thus 'inventing' completely new forms.⁹ 'The "ordinary man" is not without ruse or refuge in face of all the forces that attempt to dispossess and domesticate him':¹⁰ this is also what is proposed by Michel Foucault in his 'anthem to small things,' when he suggests that we need to analyze the microscopic operations proliferating within formal and institutional structures, and when he speaks, as we have already pointed out, of the need for a 'political anatomy of the detail,' echoing Marx's call for an 'anatomy of capital.'¹¹ This relatively precise localization of analysis leads us not to seek *one* cause for 'voluntary servitude,' normalization and the authoritarian exercise of power, but instead encourages us to be sensitive to the unfinished nature of practices and explanations, to causal plurality and what Max Weber called the 'composition effects.'¹² This approach allows us to uncover all that is incomplete, unexpected and unintentional, to counter theories of absolute control, to distance ourselves from big concepts and favor instead a 'secular history.'¹³ This has been demonstrated by writers and 'dissidents.' Although the specific circumstances in which they wrote these texts, and the (often moralistic and normative) posture which they adopted or which was ascribed to them, may mean their writings have to be read with a critical eye,¹⁴ they express something fundamental and to some extent universal. Through his novels, Alexandre Zinoviev shows the 'importance of the little things'¹⁵ in the way Soviet society worked, precisely because these 'little things' comprised its real substance and the state, 'grandiose in its little things,' viewed itself as the state of the 'reconstruction of everyday life.'¹⁶ In emphasizing the need to understand the 'concrete individual,' the political writings of Vaclav Havel on the Czechoslovak regime suggest that coercion and mechanisms of domination shifted 'into the sphere of the conditions of life,' and that to understand the exercise of power, the passivity and indifference of ordinary people, it is necessary to focus in detail on the distribution of privileges, the conditions of labor and social promotion, material aspirations, the

distribution of goods and wealth, and so on.¹⁷ This is also demonstrated by academic studies. Investigations into Salazarism have highlighted, as we have seen, the importance of the 'world of little things' for Portuguese leaders who were filled with anxiety by capitalism and modernization, primarily concerned with defending the 'small' (petty officials, small traders, craftsmen and industrialists, small services, etc.), with knowing, respecting, maintaining and controlling a world of things that were socially and economically small, pulverized, varied and contradictory, while maintaining the balance between forces and groups with often divergent interests.¹⁸ Several recent studies of the Third Reich have shown how the small procedures of everyday life, micro-decisions and the practical implementation of measures may lead to the worst disasters,¹⁹ while work on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has stressed the need to 'come down' as close as possible to local, sectorial and individual cogs to understand the dynamics of domination and even repression.²⁰

Thus, grasping domination requires that we first look at the reactions of all actors to economic development and the system of sampling, redistribution and control by the central government, the 'strategic usages' (Michel Foucault) they make of social rules and norms, the tactical reactions and usages that are not known in advance and open unexpected spaces. But it is necessary, subsequently, to discover the strategies, intentions, desires and visions proper to actors and the interaction of these latter with those of their rulers. This is the whole point of the distinction between 'construction' and 'formation' given by John Lonsdale for the case of Kenya, and systematized by Jean-François Bayart: domination results not only, and does not result primarily, from a vision and a program that are consciously constructed by state actors; rather it is a complex, largely unconscious and contradictory historical process, made up of conflicts, negotiations and compromises between groups.²¹ Understanding this complexity of the exercise of domination thus requires that, first and foremost, consideration be paid to the 'interstices of normative systems already established or in the process of formation,' the spaces of autonomy of these 'subaltern' or 'dominated' actors who can also 'mark political reality with a lasting impression, not preventing the forms of domination, but conditioning and modifying them.'²² The intentionalist hypothesis collides with these unexpected modifications and conditionings, these specific rationalities and strategies (different from those of the state apparatus), and the ambiguity of the rules.

NOTES

1. I am here alluding both to Michel Dobry's discussions of Weber's thought (M. Dobry, 'Légitimité et calcul rationnel') and to those of Claude Lefort on the blind alley in which end up analyses of totalitarianism as an ideal-type which drastically over-simplifies the historical realities (C. Lefort, *La Complication. Retour sur le communisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1988 [1]). Also quoted in Traverso, *Le Totalitarisme*).
2. M. Weber, 'Critical studies in the logic of the cultural sciences,' in *Collected Methodological Writings*, p. 140
3. Quoted in Henry, *Le Socialisme selon Marx*, pp. 31 ff.
4. Fassin, 'Biopouvoir ou biolégitimité?'
5. The subtitle of one of the chapters in P. Veyne, *Le Pain et le Cirque*, p. 38 (he continues his discussion of this theme in the following pages).
6. Marcuse, *One-dimensional man* (London and New York: Routledge, second edition, 1991) p. 198.
7. De Certeau, *La Faiblesse de croire*, p. 81.
8. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (all the expressions in quotation marks are those used by the author in his general introduction, pp. xi–xxiv).
9. Ibid. (the expressions are those of M. de Certeau). See also the earlier work by H. Lefebvre, *Critique of everyday life*, transl. John Moore, with a preface by Michel Trebitsch, 3 vols (London: Verso, 2008; first published in French 1946–1981). In another intellectual lineage, this is also shown by C. Grignon and J.C. Passeron in their critique of the contrast between 'popular culture' and 'high culture': *Le Savant et le Populaire. Misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature* (Paris: Le Seuil-Gallimard, 1989) [2].
10. R. Chartier, 'Michel de Certeau: History, or Knowledge of the Other,' in *On the Edge of the Cliff*, pp. 39–47 (p. 46).
11. This intellectual line of descent is highlighted in Lüdtké, 'La République démocratique allemande comme histoire.'
12. Weber, *Economy and society; Political Writings*, and *The Protestant Ethic*.
13. Quotation taken from Minard, *Les Fortunes du colbertisme*, p. 13.
14. See, for example, the—extremely subtle and pertinent—critique of Havel's works in A. Yurchak, 'Soviet hegemony of form. Everything

- was forever until it was no more,' *Comparative Study in Society and History*, 45, 3 (July 2003), pp. 480–510 [3].
15. Zinoviev, *The Radiant Future*. The full quotation reads: 'But you are all unable to leave your romantic clouds and come back down to the dirty ground of reality and judge it impartially. You'll never understand our society, for you don't have the means to do so. More precisely, you'll never be able to gauge at its proper worth all the significance of the little nothings of our lives. Little nothings, let me repeat it! If our system is grand, it is through its nothings, it's a grandeur of nothing at all—and that's the whole problem,' p. 672.
 16. Azarova, *L'Appartement communautaire*, title of Chap. 2.
 17. Havel, 'Open letter to Gustav Husak.' Available at http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=1_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML
 18. Rosas, Martins, Amaral, and Rollo, *O Estado Novo (1926–1974)*.
 19. For a general account, see Gellately, *Backing Hitler*. For a first systematic account of the critique of intentionalist and functionalist analyses of Nazism, see Mason, 'Intention and explanation. A current controversy about the interpretation of National Socialism,' in Mason, *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class*, pp. 212–230.
 20. N. Werth, 'Le stalinisme au pouvoir. Mise en perspective historiographique,' *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 69 (January–March 2001), pp. 125–135 [4]; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*; F.-X. Nérard, *5% de vérité. La dénonciation dans l'URSS de Staline (1928–1941)* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004) [5]; Favarel-Garrigues, *Policing Economic Crime in Russia*.
 21. Lonsdale, 'The conquest state of Kenya, 1895–1905'; Bayart, 'Hors de la "vallée malheureuse" de l'africanisme,' and 'L'invention paradoxale de la modernité économique.'
 22. Levi, *Le Pouvoir au village*, pp. 12–13.

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