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BROKEN HEGEMONIES

A review of Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, translated by Reginald Lilly, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003, 692 pp.

REINER SCHÜRMANN'S LONG AWAITED PATH-BREAKING READING of western philosophy is here at last. The admirable translation of the original French manuscript by Reginald Lilly presents Schürmann's posthumous *Des Hégémonies Brisées* and allows the reader to have access to the complexity of the arguments in this book, arguments which, more often than not, are highly nuanced. The work contains a radically new interpretation of the major constitutive figures of eras of western philosophy. Schürmann's interpretation is new in that it rethinks these eras through their dominant languages: Greek, Latin, and vernacular languages. Schürmann offers a deconstruction of the institution of the "ultimate referents" that enable governable eras by defining thinking and doing in each era and by securing all thought and action to a point of moorage—and at times unquestionably so. As such, the hermeneutical strategy of the book is informed by the meticulous reading of the flashes of death and destitution right into the inception and instituting moments that yield an entire subsequent era. *Broken Hegemonies* is then about the singularizing effect of mortality that always returns to haunt works of natality through dispossession. And (may I add: "no wonder"?) it was written by a philosopher destined to meet his own singularity (Schürmann died [may I add: "prematurely"] of AIDS in 1993).

More to the point, the book exposes the "hegemonic fantasms," those handiworks that the "natural metaphysician in us" posits. "In brief," he writes, "natality makes us posit hegemonic fantasms" (346). As the "civil servants of humanity" (Husserl), philosophers in each era have thetically posited ultimacies and have hidden them under the guise of logic, argument, fact, or simply whatever rhetorical device that came handy. A stealthy but hegemonic normative force demands from us a certain mode of thinking and acting as a prerequisite for our entry into public life of the era. "But once the foam of fashion is blown aside, the skelature of the normative agent makes its appearance" (15).

That normative agent, of course, is no one but the philosopher. In Schürmann's words: "In each of us there is the natural metaphysician whose purpose is to bring such an originary wildness to order. Philosophy hearkens to this hope" (504).

The main thesis of the book, then, is "to define epochs by means of the fantasmic organization instituted by a language" (4) and thus to disclose the regimes that "ultimate authorities" found through language (5). "A hegemonic fantasm decides what can be for an era" (437). In this vein, a specific phenomenological approach called "topology" is employed (38). The three (linguistic) eras that Schürmann analyzes *in extenso* are the Greek, Latin and modern eras. But in reading singularizing mortality at work in every edifying movement of natality or, put differently, in reading the anarchic "undertow" in every archic moment of foundation, Schürmann's hermeneutical strategy necessitates the careful selection of those sites (*topoi*) where the suppression of the subversive (that is, what overturns [*vertere*] from the base [*sub-*]) has taken place in order to secure a hegemonic reorganization of life. "Fantasms legislate by marking strategic relations in being, not by sanctioning some one particular strategy against some other particular strategy" (441-42). Every hegemonic fantasm is therefore thought in a bifocal way (Sophocles' *amphinoein*): from the angle of institution as well as that of destitution in the Greek and Latin eras. But since the modern era is still running its course (we live in the age of accomplished metaphysics, to borrow a term from Gianni Vattimo) we may only speak of its institution and the present diremption we are experiencing on a planetary scale.

As such, the henological turns in Parmenides and Plotinus define the outer posts of the Greek era, the principle of telic continuity in Cicero and Augustine and the double bind of origin and principle in Meister Eckhart bracket the Latin ambit. Finally, the determining consciousness in Kant and Luther marks the constitutive edge of modernity, while the ultimate double bind in Heidegger (with a correction made by Hannah Arendt [624]) that singularizes all universals back to their humble origins indicates the diremptive pull of our modern era. The entire meticulous discussion of these philosophers (and many others) is embraced by an extended general introduction that is theoretically and methodologically significant, especially in discussing his method of the "analytic of ultimates," and also by a brilliant conclusion on the "conditions of evil." Should there be any surprise, then, as to why this book appears in nearly 700 pages?

This review naturally cannot attend to every thinker deconstructed in this work, nor does the author of these lines claim expertise to engage with every aspect of Schürmann's work. Several thoughtful engagements with the issues raised in *Broken Hegemonies* have already been published to which I refer the interested

reader.¹ And with the publication of the book more discussions and debates are sure to come. We should discuss in brief here the common thread that holds these thinkers of western eras under the metaphysical sway. In each case, something in ordinary and common experience—shared by layman and philosopher alike due to Dasein's insertedness in an epochal *Menschentum*—is endowed through the philosopher's work with an ultimacy of one kind or another and is thus maximized to the extent of instituting laws and imposing norms upon almost all aspects of life. While the maximization of an act or knowledge beyond its original domain of occurrence is due to the expansive power of natality that institutes laws, norms, and hegemonies, singularization slips under the foundations of the edified hegemony of universal laws like a stealthy undertow, thanks to mortality. "The singular point of departure from which the law arises, a singularization, will fracture from within the universal endowment with the force of obligation" (343). That is why when we speak of broken hegemonies, we must understand the breakdown not as a consequence of a thetical opposition nor as an impact of an agent's liberation war, but as a fracturing of hegemonies from within. Natality expands and institutes but it is also inevitably headed for its inevitable demise. Perhaps Simon Critchley's metaphor provides a good description of this pull toward mortality: "The epoch of metaphysics, like a dying star, is at its point of exhaustion, a point from which, paradoxically, it swells like a red giant to extend its domination and comprehend all resistance, ethical, political, or otherwise."² We are borne toward death along with all that we create, but we adamantly persist in disregarding and "sending into oblivion" (Heidegger) our being-toward-death. *Broken Hegemonies* provides a phenomenology that lets us realize and articulate how every genealogy of institution is at the same time inevitably a necrology of destitution.

The notion of the "differend" is one of the main concepts at work in this book: it enables the reading which captures the perpetual return to the monstrous site that is ours today. "By differend one understands the conflict of disparate laws calling for an impossible common authority," asserts Schürmann. "I speak of a differend only to describe this call and the referents that are posited to fulfill it in an illusory manner" (551). The discord between two laws, a discord he calls a differend, can only be overcome by a superior authority (349). However, the

¹ See: Dennis J. Schmidt, "Solve et Coagula: Something Other than an Exercise in Dialectic." *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998). 259-271; Reginald Lilly, "The Topology of Des Hégémonies brisées." *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998). 226-242; Drew A. Hyland, "Reiner Schürmann's Parmenides: Of Unbroken Non-Hegemonies." *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998). 243-258; Gérard Granel, "Untameable Singularity (Some Remarks on *Broken Hegemonies*)," translated by Charles T. Wolfe. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 19:2-20:1 (1997). 215-228; Dominique Janicaud, "Back to a Monstrous Site: Reiner Schürmann's Reading of Heidegger's *Beiträge*." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 19:2-20:1 (1997). 287-297.

² Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 89.

authority can never fully resolve or settle this discord. Hence, a dialectical method will not be able to capture the essence of epochs. Schürmann's reference to the story of Agamemnon who sacrifices his daughter, Iphigania, shows just that. The function of such authority is simply (and with simplification) to issue an operational verdict in favour of one law over another. The discord between the two laws, however, remains operative, like the magma under the seemingly unshakable grace of Mount Vesuvius, *waiting* to unfold its effect, diremption, *in time*. Literally. Time or temporalization, being destined toward death, can only bring instituted supreme authorities to their dismal end. "The origin is indeed its own worst enemy, thanks to time" (572).

As the discord between laws in the three periods of our metaphysical history, the differend has been met and captured by philosophers of each age. The Greek visited the differend in the tragic One, the Latins in the erratic nature, and we the children of modernity in pathetic consciousness (441). We all "visited" the discordance, and we all consistently denied it, amusing ourselves with, and seeking assurances in, fantasmic referents (the Greek One, the Latin *natura*, the modern consciousness/subject) that would alleviate our troubled minds and bruised souls. The referent "guarantees there is truth in knowing, rightness in acting and immutability in being" (276). We are calmed by such ultimacies, sending into oblivion any disturbing memory of the differend. At such points, philosophy comes quite handy. Philosophers promote a certain experience "to the level of normative instance capable of consoling the soul and consolidating the city" (9). Whence emerge ultimate referents.

Schürmann argues that since 1831, the year Hegel died, hegemonic fantasms have suffered suspension. It took western humanity half-a-century to find the bifocal gaze necessary for a deconstruction of modernity that would also prepare for a new thinking. This did not happen until 188 when Nietzsche embarked on the first subversive act to have been inflicted upon the modern edifice of reason— (447). But in looking at how we came to understand the diremption and the need at some point to "let-go" of the promises of "enfranchised reason," we also inevitably look at ourselves—our shifting situatedness, to be precise. As the points of apogee of our era shift due to temporalization, we experience a parallax that allows us to see the diremption and perhaps, like Schürmann, to identify dates that we attach to the coming of diremption as a way of situating ourselves in the "the temporal essencing (*Wesung*) of being" (572). Parallax, a term borrowed from optics, refers to the phenomenon that as we move through epochs the measure of the facticity of referents changes in our gaze (255-56). The *fact* (itself an effect of our present measure of facticity) that we write on metaphysics while trying to articulate its diremption indicates the parallactic effect in our gaze, an effect we owe to the temporalizaiton that lets our epoch be

shot through, linking one *historial* point to another despite dominant historical-chronological logics. Points in history that have been deemed of no civilizational significance suddenly erupt before our eyes and reveal themselves as laden with possibilities of which we have (thankfully) experienced a few. These experiences made us who we are today—the children of a time out of joint.

If the differend is at work in our present experience of epochal diremption, then what we experience today is the discordance between legislation and transgression. At the heart of every legislative strategy there is a transgressive counter-strategy. Every archic universalization can only emerge by covering over an anarchic singularity. Natal foundation is ultimately a pull toward mortality. In order to understand it properly, one must regard transgression not as an act of intention but as an occurrence within and outside legislation (614). This double pull is at work in Heidegger's *Ereignis*, the event in which the double occurrence of appropriation and expropriation make epochal constellation possible, giving an epoch its character. On this note, Schürmann avers: "The two incongruent clusters of attraction-natality-maximization-appropriation and withdrawal-mortality-singularization-expropriation, then the denial of this whole second cluster as well as the exaltation of attractive, maximally normative theses" (626). In our time of diremption, the double cluster produces the effect of deferral that the later Heidegger shows by his hyphenation of *da-sein*, with the "da—" referring at the same time to "here" and "there," to actuality and to the possibilities of being, in the sense of Greek *alétheia* which contains within itself *lethé*. The "there" of possibility remains for us as our potential destiny toward a "new beginning." "The reign of referents posited as universally normative—metaphysics—has only produced violence and isomorphism. Now, for a century another destiny has been prepared, responding to the one instituted in Greece" (567).

Those of us familiar with Schürmann's earlier works, especially his well-received *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, find points of convergence and divergence between the two works. His *Heidegger* bears the stamp of a flourishing life among other things, an effect of natality as Schürmann probably would have said, while *Broken Hegemonies* certainly comes from a life pulled toward death. A careful comparative study of the prose of the two texts will reveal this. Also in a typical Schürmannian way, the last word of metaphysics is sought in Heidegger. There is no effective discussion of the important works of post-Heideggerians such as Gianni Vattimo and Werner Marx. On several points whose enumeration goes beyond a book review, Schürmann's deconstruction of metaphysics comes recognizably close to Derrida's. But Derrida is only marginally referred to in this book, let alone

discussed.³

Broken Hegemonies ends with a long and remarkable conclusion on the conditions of evil, the conditions that lead us to the denial of our tragic situatedness. Concern for the ostensible global demise of humanity fills the tone of this book. The opening page leaves no doubt about such concern: "The ease with which a whole age nonetheless continues to graze, in spite of exterminations still alive in our memories and planetary asphyxiations already in our throats, gives grounds for perplexity" (3). Perhaps humanity is struggling with its last denial. Perhaps it will soon be too late, given the extent of destruction we have caused our planet, our societies, our humanity. No wonder the conditions of evil are yet to be properly understood. There is a possible destiny in 'the other beginning,' but that is no utopian comfort as it cannot be logically or referentially derived from principles. "At the beginning of the twentieth-first century in the West, we are rather well-stationed to recover—if that were possible—from denial and thoughtlessness. Looking back from hubris toward tragic knowing, the *singular* can suddenly show itself incongruously *in differend with the world*" (631). As "thoughtlessness" (Arendt) seems our predominant collective feature today, we are left to rely on our sobriety and farsightedness. So let us end this small narration of a great work by a simple but civilizational warning: "We can miss our destiny" (412). Lest it happen!

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Vahabzadeh, Peyman. "Broken Hegemonies." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 5 no. 3 (August 2004): 51-56. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/05.3/vahabzadeh.pdf>

³ For a brief discussion on the possible theoretical convergences between Schürmann and Derrida see: Dominique Janicaud, "Back to a Monstrous Site" (op. cit.).