

Lawrence Liang

Ultranationalism: A Proposal for a Quiet Withdrawal

01/05

I developed an early suspicion of any form of nationalism courtesy of a geography teacher and an imaginary cricket game. As the only student of Chinese origin in a high school in Bangalore, I was asked by my teacher in a benign voice who I would support if India and China played a match. Aside from the ridiculousness of the question (China does not even play cricket), the dubious intent behind it was rather clear, even to a teenager. Still, I dutifully replied, “Sir, I will support India,” for which I received a gratified smile and a pat on the head. I was offended less by the crude attempt by someone in power to force a kid to prove his patriotism, than by the outright silliness of the game. If all it took to establish the euphoric security of nationalism was that simple answer, I figured there must be something drastically wrong with the question. I was left, however, with an uneasy feeling (one that has persisted through the years), not because I had given a false answer but because I had been forced to answer a false question. The answer made pragmatic sense in a schoolboy way (you don’t want to piss off someone who is going to be marking your papers), and I hadn’t read *King Lear* yet to know that the only appropriate response to the question should have been silence. If Cordelia refuses to participate in Lear’s competition of affective intimacy, it is not just the truth, but also the distasteful aesthetics of her sister’s excessive declarations of love, that motivates her withdrawal into silence.

If we similarly measure ultranationalism not just on a political plane but on an aesthetic one, we are immediately struck by just how deafeningly loud and shrill it is. While one could attempt to counter the ascending clamor with speech of one’s own, there are times when our silence may be our greatest weapon. I would suggest that if we think of ultranationalism as an affective excess marked by a hyperperformative jingoism, often orchestrated around sporting rituals, then one of the undervalued ways of countering excess has been asceticism.

If nationalism presumes our consent to a social contract and ultranationalism forcefully demands such a consent, what would it mean to imagine silence as a political act – not one of tacit consent, but rather the withdrawal of it? Stanley Cavell argues that presumptions of the social contract are always subject to repudiation through the withdrawal of consent, or withdrawal from society.¹ The withdrawal of my consent is not necessarily a nihilistic rejection of the world, but a dispute that I have about its content. It is both possible and reasonable to reject society as it stands (because it is unfaithful to what I have consented to) while still consenting to a conversation about the horizon

e-flux journal #56 — June 2014 Lawrence Liang
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of possibilities of this society. The radical potential of such disagreements about the substantive content of politics is testified to by the existence of laws of sedition, which seek to criminalize forms of speech that create “disaffection” towards the state. For Agamben, the state is not founded on a social bond of which it is the expression, but rather on the dissolution, the unbinding it prohibits.

02/05



Schoolchildren display posters of Indian cricket player Sachin Tendulkar, known to be one of the greatest batsmen of all time, India, 2013. Photo: AP.

But while the state may enforce laws against speech, how does it proscribe seditious thoughts and feelings that do not seek out a public, but are uttered in silence? In 2013, on a trip to postwar Jaffna, Sri Lanka to meet activists and scholars, I was introduced to Jagadeesan (known to a few as “the philosopher”), who lived alone in a remote village. The philosopher was once a part of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, but after he became a critic of their politics, he was arrested, detained, and tortured by them for several years. After his release, he withdrew from active political life, choosing to live in isolation. When we asked him what he felt about the postwar situation and the mounting Sinhalese chauvinism spurred on by the victory of the ultranationalists, he looked at us and replied that he had no idea since he rarely talked to people any longer. Gesturing to the trees in front of the house, he said that he now only spoke to trees and shared his jokes with them, since people did not even understand jokes anymore. If people no longer understood jokes, he said, it was clear that the world was going mad and there was no hope left. He indicated that he was less and less interested in the political affairs of the world around him, and more and more attracted to forms of spiritual practice (even as he gave detailed instructions to someone on how to repair their pump: he had been an engineer). His helpfulness to his neighbors and his comfort

with technical matters seemed to bely the claim that he had entirely withdrawn from the social, and yet at the same time, his melancholic disposition seemed to indicate a form of inhabiting the world through the act of mourning it, which in his case required his turning away from it.

Jagadeesan’s withdrawal from society and his loss of hope could be interpreted as a form of apolitical ascetic withdrawal into the domain of the spiritual. However, it may benefit us to recall another political ascetic, Henry David Thoreau, who allegedly turned away from politics and towards nature at the height of his political career. In contrast to accounts that see Thoreau’s withdrawal into the woods to write *Walden* as an apolitical act that diverged from his more explicitly political writings such as *Civil Disobedience*, Shannon Mariotti, in her book *Thoreau’s Democratic Withdrawal*, focuses on how withdrawal from public life may itself be the basis for rethinking the political.² It is often assumed that democracy cannot thrive if citizens withdraw from public spaces, but how are we to find expressions for our deepest disagreements with the very content of democratic politics and its validation by a vast majority of people? Mariotti claims that Thoreau’s deepest insights into democracy and politics may be found not in his explicitly political writings, but in his reflections on nature. In fact, *Walden* is a text that forces us to move beyond the binaries of politics and nature, democracy and withdrawal. Thoreau’s retreat into nature, Mariotti suggests, was not a retreat from the political as much as an immersion into a form of life that allowed for the cultivation of one’s true nature as the means to understand and activate the basis of a true democracy. In his essay on civil disobedience, Thoreau stated that he wanted to be a “bad subject” but a “good neighbor,” and towards such end he resembled Socrates, the quintessential bad citizen who disturbed, prodded, and destroyed the euphoric security of the state with his questions.

If ultranationalism is charged with an affective immediacy bordering on frenzied exuberance, what Thoreau and Jagadeesan share is a melancholic relation to the present, but a melancholia based not on a mythical idea of an idealized past that has been lost, but instead on a mourning for an alternative future that the present does not allow. Their respective withdrawals into nature and silence are, to my mind, a kind of experimentation with forms of selves that reject any pragmatic or realist usurpations of the political horizons of the self. In that sense, it would be a mistake to read either Thoreau or Jagadeesan in purely personal terms, since their withdrawals are both a response to

e-flux journal #56 — June 2014 Lawrence Liang
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the state of politics as we currently know it, as well as an attempt to redefine a political community that includes trees and neighbors. The temporal distance of one and the spatial proximity of the other are anathema to the national imagination of time and boundaries.

If the radical call of politics is cast in terms of a call to action and a demand for a response, how do we situate the refusal to stand up and the refusal to be counted in a collective as the performance of a nonrepresentative individual? Rancière has suggested that perhaps the truly dangerous classes are not so much those that make up a “collective,” with their clear sense of common purpose (class, race, and so forth), but those that refuse to be collapsed within any collective, whether dominant or oppositional. Thus if we revisit Thoreau’s assertion that his thoughts “are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her” in light of his fierce individualism, we find in it a seditious imagination that exceeds the language of an anti-nationalist politics, which itself often runs the risk of being wedded to a logic of counter-collective claims – whether as an alternative public sphere, a cosmopolitanism, or even a nationalism in fancy dress (as is the case with many armed struggles).

The desire to be a good neighbor and to befriend trees offers us a different kind of affective surplus – one that finds echoes in Leela Gandhi’s description of the radical anticolonial politics of friendship. Tracing the careers of individual Europeans like C. F. Andrews (Mahatma Gandhi’s trusted friend and secretary) and writers like E. M. Forster, Leela Gandhi provides us an image of sedition not as a collective political act but as a series of individual refusals which nonetheless undermine the possibility of a consistent uniform whole – the sustaining myth of any ultranationalism. Leela Gandhi describes a woman in Australia driving to a detention center with a placard bearing the words “You are not alone,” to show her solidarity with those inside. Long before she could even raise her slogan, she was arrested and detained. But in that single moment of violence, she herself became an alien – subject, as aliens are, to the crushing might of the state. Gandhi suggests that we understand this relatively insignificant act – this minor self-endangerment for another – as one that produces a surplus of sociality and love. She chooses to call it the politics of friendship.³

Leela Gandhi then cites E. M. Forster’s marvelous passage in his *Two Cheers for Democracy* where he says

I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and

betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country. Such a choice may scandalize the modern reader, and he may stretch out his patriotic hand to the telephone at once and ring the police ... When they do, down with the state say I, which means the state would down me.⁴

03/05

Ultranationalism presumes that the nation should be both the natural and preferred home for everyone, but as Forster’s words show us, there may be those who do not feel at home in the nation and are threatened with either exile in the case of political action, or with self-exile in the case of Thoreau and Jagadeesan. It is this uneasiness of not being at home, which prompts a withdrawal from the comforts of our given political communities, to which we need to turn our attention.



A street sign pays homage to Henry David Thoreau, near Concord, Massachusetts.

For Thoreau, cities represented an enclave of comfort, which produces citizens as machines produce commodities. But if sedition runs the risk of the subject being cast out of the sphere of the citizen, withdrawal runs an additional risk – of being cast out of the domain of the political itself. But it is precisely the potential of these nonpolitical realms, such as walking and neighboring, to which Shannon Mariotti draws our attention. Specific practices such as walking

and huckleberry picking seem to inculcate in Thoreau a sense of affection that moves from the natural world to the social world and back (a recurring theme in classical Chinese poetry as well). To love a particular mountain or stream is not to love the motherland or fatherland in an abstract sense. It is instead a mode of passionate inhabitation which in fact often runs contrary to the imagination of national interest, as witnessed by the struggles of indigenous people across the world against large modernist development projects that propel them into a homogenous empty time. Even as I write this, a new ultranationalist government in India, led by Narendra Modi, is being sworn in after a decisive victory in the recent national elections. One of the anticipated changes that the new government is going to bring about is an amendment to the land acquisition law that will make it easier for the state and corporations to acquire land from indigenous people and forest dwellers.

A few years ago, when the state of Himachal Pradesh was attempting to acquire land for a skiing resort, a ninety year-old man who had objected to his land being acquired stated that he did not see the urgency of moving from where he was. On being asked why, as the compensation package was good, he explained that the □“dhoop” (warm sunlight) that he was used to for the last twenty years in the patch where he sat everyday would disappear from his life, and he □was not keen to lose it. It is no surprise that the root word for the word “fond” comes from the word “ground,” and there can perhaps be no common ground on which we can stand, no collective ideal that we can imagine, if it not founded on an idea of gentle affection of this kind. This is the form of passionate dwelling that we need to retreat to if we are to truly withdraw from the hyperbolic clarion call of nationalism.

If the excess of ultranationalism demands that we stand whenever the national anthem is played, or that we cheer in the loudest voice every act of triumphant chest-beating, it may well be time for us to continue sitting where we are precisely because we love the ground that we sit on, and to do so quietly, since sedition sometimes speaks in whispers. Let us also consider, via the words of George Steiner, what it may mean to walk, to withdraw, and to discover anew another political nature:

Trees have roots. Men have legs, with which to visit, to dwell among the rest of mankind as guests. I would want to think of these visitors as the truly human beings we must try to become if we are to survive at all ...
Intrusion may be our calling, so as to

suggest to our fellow men and women at large that all human beings must learn how to live as each others guests in life. There is no society, no religion, no city, no village not worth improving. By the same token, there is none not worth leaving when injustice or barbarism takes charge. Morality must always have its bags packed.⁵

04/05

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05/05

1
Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004). See also Andrew Norris, *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

2
Shannon L. Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal: Alienation, Participation, and Modernity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

3
Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

4
Ibid. 25.

5
George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (London: Hachette UK, 2011). Steiner has various versions of this quote in different books.

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