

**Short piece on refusal,  
disloyalty  
and  
resistance**  
*Diana Bulzan*

We would like to inquire whether disloyalty and its counterpart, betrayal, can be invoked as political strategies of resistance. Thus, within this paradigm we would reserve the right to treat loyalty in negative terms, as the strong affirmation of oneself through identity, whether it be nationalistic, gender-based or in terms of a political affiliation. This necessity stems from the concern that resistant cultural practices and critical apparatuses can



become themselves places for the affirmation of (an oppressive) power. In order to properly describe this situation, we will use the term 'affective loyalty.' *Affective loyalty is largely the demand for 'caring',* in other words for a total subjective involvement as the pre-condition for an access to vital resources. We would like to offer the hypothesis that this practice stands in direct line with the formation of societies of control whereby power is no longer strictly embedded in clearly delimited places, i.e. institutions, but can rather disengage from a particular topos. This is a power in flux. It can shift, move and territorialize practices which would apparently nonetheless oppose it. Foucault had already announced it. Resistance is the necessary excess produced by any power and both the power and the resistance orbit around each other, find their centre of gravity in one another, so that only through both can the system stay in place. Resistance – or a

certain kind of it – would thus be tacitly allowed. Žižek calls this pseudo-resistance or pseudo-activity.

The idea would then be that a regular practice of resistance, such as a protest, functions like an outlet for our frustrations and, in so doing, practically achieves further compliance. It provides a release for that which cannot be contained by the system, while still making it part of its functioning.

However, there is a moment of refusal which can bypass this logic. For Žižek this is the moment of indeterminate and total negation to be found in Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to.' 'I would prefer not to' is a peculiar statement, striking both through its politeness and obstinacy. The self manifests itself as a pure instance of refusal, both the subject, the 'I', and the object of the sentence remain indeterminate. There is no clear object or action which is refused. Paradoxically, we are dealing with the affirmation of a pure negation, which also assumes a strange temporality through the conditional 'would'.

**Grammatically, would is defined as the past tense of will. The 'will' lends its place to the hypothetical 'would', replacing the clear mark of an action extending itself into the future with its suspension. Therefore 'I would prefer not to' could also be the sign of an indeterminate tempo-**

reality, a suspension of our notion of progress which tends to over-determine our interaction with the world. In any case, it is this indeterminacy which makes it into a refusal of the logic outlined above. And in the end, Bartleby will obstinately affirm his refusal to the point of self-annihilation. Secondly, we would wonder if this moment of total negation cannot be associated with one of self-differentiation, a.k.a. with a dismissal of a socially attached identity. Let's follow this logic to its conclusion: 'I would prefer not to' is the refusal to participate, to take part in any activity. It is therefore also the refusal to play one's part regardless of its content. It is in this that the strength of refusal consists of. Disloyalty then would come to the fore precisely as a strategy of refusing to take part. Needless to say, this would entail making a crucial difference between the self and its social, functional identity, i.e. 'who we are within a certain society, which determines the way we move within the system', while still allowing the notion of the self to subsist. And this would be one of the crucial points of resistance, the ability to freely move between the two and to face the limitations of social identities on ourselves. Then the ability to think the conditions structuring our reality would be precisely within this interval, between ourselves and ourselves. In other words, the self is not identical with itself, it is not a point of coincidence, but rather of differentiation. The attempt to bring betrayal into the present discussion stems from two considerations: first, the act of betrayal as changing your mind, as changing sides. Second, the act of betrayal as separation from and refusal of the expectations of society, usually still

represented through traditional family roles and from which we would take the liberty to bring a feminine component into play. For, the stability of the family may belong to the authority of the father, but it hinges on the role of the mother. It is the women who actively 'care' and who, through their 'caring', mediate between those roles. Betrayal is then another name for the refusal to play the part or to 'care' for the values of an entire structure. In Lévi-Strauss' anthropological system, women played the part of the exchange value, or 'gifts' creating bridges across different tribal families. In Benjamin's discussion of Baudelaire and the Paris of the late nineteenth century, the prostitute is the embodiment of the commodity. And while Baudelaire, the flâneur, could afford the luxury of freely walking around and absently gazing upon commodities (the perception of the wanderer, abstracted and distracted from his own body and his part in the production process), Buck-Morss points out that women could not afford that luxury. For a woman, playing the part of the flâneur meant risking to be taken for a prostitute. She could not linger in public spaces, without risking to become a commodity herself.

Then, we would make the following proposition: that this act of refusal should be a feminist strategy, precisely because it seeks to dismantle the stable identities on which oppression is and was grounded. And rather than subsuming this feminist point to a Marxist reading of capitalism, we would insist on the necessity of convergence between the two, without fully conflating one into the other.

The demand for 'affective loyalty' might allow us to proceed further.

Naming 'caring' as a demand for the self is not only a denunciation of the marketisation of the self, but rather the next step. Affective loyalty proceeds through identification, either identification with a cause, a practice, a set of ideas, a gender or a nationality. The idea counteracting the notion of affective loyalty would be the assumption of difference, the possibility of assuming a distance which would halt the identification. In Jacques Rancière's words, a gesture of dis-identification and dis-sensus.

Before we move on, a better look at this notion is advisable. 'Affective loyalty' is the assumption of an allegiance to a particular idea of myself, which would allow me to continue to exist and to function in a certain representation/view of the world. Upon this representation hinges the coherence of myself as a subject. I extend myself towards the social, which I therefore interpret from my position within my representation. Within my resistance against the system of neoliberal capitalist exploitation, my identity then acts an anchor for my discourse. I take the cue of my resistance from my lived experience, I

make this lived experience count as a discourse through which I affirm myself despite the power which seeks to stifle me. But this strategy seems to us short-sighted and reactionary. Though it may seek to articulate a discourse denouncing a system of oppression, by making the lived experience count – in other words, by making it visible, by allowing it to exist – we must wonder if this strategy is not a pseudo-strategy and if this affirmation of the self has not become its embalmment.

Take for instance this: it has now become commonplace for the critical apparatus to affirm its own impotence in front of the capitalist system. We hear this in our universities and see it in most sites for contemporary art as well. The underlying logic seems to be: criticise and denounce we can but change we cannot. The main characteristic of the neoliberal system would be its capacity to absorb its critique and then sell it back to us. A double profit, if you will. Annulment and capital at once. Two birds with one stone and one movement. What now? And even if we make it our point to stay humble for the moment – and therefore not to incite any accusations of naïveté – we refrain ourselves to asking solely what this in turn means for our capacity to think and to imagine.

The freedom to switch between identities is the freedom to see the world as ultimately indeterminate and open to re-signification. It is the freedom to exist within and outside of oneself, to be me and not be me at the same time. It is the freedom to set ourselves apart from the nationality written on our passports and embedded in our gestures, the freedom to not to fully identify ourselves with the concrete contexts in which we live. "Essentially" it is the freedom to

think within and beyond these determinations. Put otherwise, it would be apparition of a distance, of an interval that would allow thought to grasp these conditions, the way it is determined by them yet without fully confining itself to them through identification.

We are fully aware that this claim may have already been made by numerous thinkers throughout history. And that we might be charged with the accusation of demanding an obsolete notion of universalism, that was already proven to be imbricated with racialized and sexist dimensions. But we don't ask for this universalism of the human nature which has been the backbone of colonialist conquest and terror. As this universalism sought to affirm itself to the detriment of others and to posit the others as the outside, as an exterior to be rejected. It's our impression that this universalism worked by creating identities and placing hierarchical values upon them. Whereas dis-identification, rejection of a stable identity, may be able to think concrete situations and see beyond them. Do you think this is possible?

Perhaps I should have started by telling you my stories and then pull the theory out of them. A work of maturation, in other words, for the childish fool in me that stubbornly oscillates between total rejection and total affirmation of her Eastern European identity, that refuses to play either the part of woman or man, that wants nothing to do with any nationality, that wants no Muttersprache as a testament of origin and whose English is designed to be nothing more than the precaution that you won't discern any traces in it. Of course, I fail. My voice betrays me each time I open my mouth, my body every time I step outside and my gestures cannot be contained by any amount of self-awareness. Still, in this failure

I recognize myself and I refuse to take its lesson to heart. These strategies are "essentially" modes of survival for the self which can be extended into modes of political resistance. *She had told herself not to worry. These things have a way of working themselves out. Bad things are really blessings in disguise. They make you move forward. 'You were getting lazy and comfortable', they meant. 'You should be in fact grateful for what happened. It would have been much worse had it happened later.' 'You have to move on, you can't let it pin you to the ground.' 'You have to fight it.' You have to pull yourself together. This is not the end of the world. Something supportive turns out to rest on something quite aggressive, the moment you refuse to heed the advice. The paradoxical nature of it did not escape her attention. Passivity had to be mixed with the activity of propelling herself forward. The how of it seemed to rest on personal preferences. Still, at least she felt content with the way she had described the situation, telling herself that this is what post-history must feel like, a sort of indeterminate stillness. Her room was quiet and still too, the only available light coming from the lamp above her bed. The documentary on the revolution of 1989 was playing now, an attempt to make time move again. You know, when Ceausescu fled, they made sure to record the exact time. 12:08. In Cluj, in one of the large squares, someone got up on the clock tower overlooking it and stopped it at precisely 12:08. This year in December it will have been showing the same time for 30 years. A bit later, the victory was announced over television, as the protesters went into the headquarters of the national television channel and declared that communism had fallen. And while all the media scholars took notice of the televised victo-*

*ry, the clock tower remains somewhat anonymous, largely overlooked. I always found it fascinating that in those final moments of revolution, someone wanted to make time stand still, as if to preserve the breaking point of a certain history. And the tower still hangs in there, above one of the busiest markets in Cluj, forever stuck at 12:08, unnoticed and undisturbed by the rumble of bodies under it.*

*My friend used to live in a building diagonally across from it and you could glimpse it through her window. I don't think she ever knew what she could be looking at and I don't remember if I ever told her about it.*

*Talking to you now about post-communism and unfulfilled hopes would defeat my purpose, as it would turn my revolution into the description of a failed one. I only wonder if they will ever fix the clock or if in the future it will be completely enveloped by its anonymity and its rupture with history forgotten. The clock was not in the documentary, this is a story I'd heard back in Cluj, when I'd signed up as a volunteer for a festival. That had been a terrible summer and the story of the clock the only thing I gained from it. Back then, I suspect I appreciated the hopeful gesture behind the still clock, however I now think that seeing that clock fixed one day would be the perfect outcome of the logic of capitalism. It was Marx who said that history repeats itself, first time as tragedy and second time as farce and it was Benjamin who wrote that fascism is the result of a failed revolution. Last month I heard that they wanted to make a museum for the horrors of Communism and banish communist ideas and I sincerely came to the belief that we need to re-think our strategies of resistance.*

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