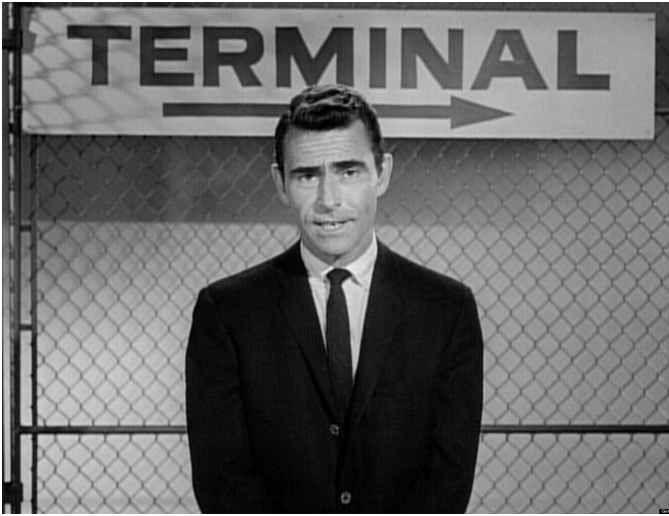


# COMMUNIST ONTOLOGY

a talk by

ROBERT HURLEY





*Imagine the world that we live in, exactly as it is right now...*

This photo with its caption seemed to offer a good entry into my material, into the thoughts I wanted to submit, although as I wrote this I didn't quite know what the thoughts were. The wanting came first. The man asking us to do this here is Rod Serling, who wrote and directed the episodes of a popular TV series from the early sixties called *The Twilight Zone*. You probably know of it. Strange encounters between people in the fictional ordinary American world. A lot could be said about Serling's real world of those years, for example about the ways Serling's themes were restricted, censored actually, about his PTSD from combat in World War II. About McCarthyism and continued segregation. I went to a segregated high school, years after the *Brown v. the Board* decision that desegregated schools by law. And about the Vietnam War heating up. Still a national disgrace that has not been owned up to. I mean, of course, not because

the U.S. lost it but because they fought it. But let's go back to the idea. Imagine the world that you live in, exactly as it is right now. Despite the difficulty of that. For example, a difficulty just caused me to change "we live in" to "you live in". What is this we? We often don't know what the we-ness is, do we? especially when there's the weakest kind of togetherness? And then, in the invitation to imagine, there is the trouble with the imaginary, the imagination, which operates through images, as if one is being asked to picture the world, to dial in a suite of images when in fact the world is also stories and signs and ideologies, semiotics and codes and the feelings or affects they create or call up, the behaviors they cause and maintain, to say nothing of the sky, the land, the oceans, the stars and the black holes. Finally there's the difficulty, to say the least, of the second half of the invitation, "exactly as it is"-- exactly indeed--one would have to be the Christian god, or some other god, to get very far with "exactly". And "As it is", one would have to catch the world in the middle of planting a garden or killing a thousand human beings in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, of becoming something different from what it was, of becoming history -- that's what the world still does. You noticed the sign behind Rod Serling, the word "terminal" inside the arrow, an airport no doubt, but there's something ominous about the scene with its chainlink fence. Could it just as well be the arrow of time that is pointing to the terminus, the end? For all I've said, though, Serling's request is precious, because I do think it says what we're called upon to do if we want to live a life and not just ride that arrow of time. Of course, to achieve that we have to think, be cognizant of, conscious of, the world we live in and not pretend or act as if we're not in the world picture, and there not as a selfie, of course, but as a soul. And this means pluralizing the world, so that we can say with some force not THAT world or THAT one but this other potential one or possible one that would allow me

and my friends, my kindred, who are a legion I imagine, to have earthly lives, since that's what is at stake in my view, a matter of life and death, just as we are, on this earth, just as it is. I'll get back to that word "potential", and also from a moment ago, the phrase "called upon to do," which raises the question, what on earth could be calling us to live a life?

First I should say, I'm not a scholar, like we have among us. But I am a book person. For a long time, I've translated books that speak to the trouble of our epoch, which has not managed to establish any durable normality. Deleuze, Foucault, Bataille, Pierre Clastres, and currently Tiqqun or Invisible Committee. Family names in a sense, but they all name an intellectual and political discomfort. They're a shelter but not a home. As the folk song says, there's no home in this world. Woody Guthrie wrote that song:

*I ain't got no home, I'm just a-roamin' 'round  
Just a wandrin' worker, I go from town to town  
And the police make it hard wherever I may go  
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore*

The song still has a truth, but the world has turned and perhaps there's no home anymore in folk music either. In any case, the figure of the wandering worker still invokes a kind of sympathy, and a nostalgia for something, for justice, perhaps for class conflict, class struggle. Only the police remain as they were, making things hard. They have no music of any kind, neither do the law courts or their prisons or the governments or the corporations. Power is not musical.

I would like to go back to that word "potential" and eventually to that phrase "called upon to," which I hope to justify, that

is, to venture what there might be that incites us to live fully, to live well. I'll take my cues from a thinker I haven't named, an Italian philosopher and scholar, Giorgio Agamben, who is a touchstone for many of us communists. He's not on the Marxist team. He doesn't continue the critique of political economy. What he does is more of a critique of Western civilization, looking at its strategies of self-construction instead of its modes of production. The same team as Foucault, I think, but the same adversary as Marx, since Western civilization has universalized into capitalist civilization. Back in 1990 he published a beautiful and poetic short treatise titled *The Coming Community*. You would guess from the title that there is a kind of "futurology" in the book, but I don't think the word "future" appears in it. It doesn't conceptualize a leap in time, but more of a rupture in time, and a new "now-time," to borrow a famous term from Walter Benjamin. The sort of rupture that many Europeans and Euro-Americans have dreamed through Christian and Jewish messianism, messiah thinking, and that morphed into the very idea of communism, which is the idea of earthly redemption and repair, *tiqqun*, in Hebrew. Those two possibilities, redemption and repair, are implied in communism, which must start over by redeeming itself as a concept and repairing its own capacities after so much abuse done to it and done to the world in its name. To pick up my thread, Agamben writes not as a religious man but as a philosopher concerned with truth-telling, and his premise no doubt is that the Messiah, the Savior, whatever that was, will never arrive in real time and from now on God will only be one name for real infinities, something like you find in Spinoza or perhaps Einstein, neither of whom found much use for theology.

So, theology no, ontology yes. You know, ontology, from the Greek: *ontos* which means being -- and *logos*, which means

thought, language, reason. It translates as true thoughts about being. Or, alternatively, the way in which being is said, and therefore the way being expresses itself. Since outside of being there is nothing, for humans language is where truth coincides with being, and untruth corresponds to nothing. So the book called *The Coming Community* launches right into its ontology with this first sentence: “The coming being is whatever being.” I don’t know how it strikes you. I see it like when the punk vocalist steps into the musical storm and shouts into the mike: “The coming being is whatever being” and things get crazy, in a good way. The word “whatever” in this case is brought over from a Latin term *quodlibet*, meaning “just as it is,” its desire to be exactly thus, its love of being just that way and not otherwise. You can see then that in English there is a similarity to our everyday term, like when we say whatever with a shrug, it doesn’t matter, but this time there is not a shrug but rather an affirmation. As Agamben puts it: a whatever being is a being for which everything matters. Being affirms itself, with all its qualities, it becomes what it is, or it is what it becomes. On the very broad scale you can extrapolate how this concept might produce a modified communist vision of a community to come. There will be no new world in the sense of a transfiguration. After the rupture, the world will be the same world as it potentially is already. There will be a change of state, like when we say the metal has changed from a solid state to a liquid state, such that the world is again held to be in common, *Omnia sunt communia*, all is in common. Ours but only for use as not ours. I believe that for most of human history this was the common assumption. But I do think it’s worth recalling Marx’s definition of communism. I’ll quote from memory: “communism is the real movement that destroys the existing state of things.” A rupture is not a rapture, it cannot be a piece of magic, and the state of things called capitalism will have to be overcome, deconstruct-

ed, decommissioned. Agreeing with Agamben on this point, communists nowadays posit that being insofar as it lives in the mode and manner of whatever beings, is fundamentally affirmative. Ontologically so, to speak in the terms I've introduced here. They also posit that capitalism, that economic monster, is essentially and absurdly destructive. I say absurdly because -- it doesn't know this, it doesn't know anything -- capitalism is ultimately self-destructive. With its blind algorithm, by which money becomes more money, it will extract everything that can be extracted from the earth and its earthdwellers, unless they disable it. So yes, or YES, the great destroyer must be destroyed as soon as possible. Destroy the destroyer, a negation of the negation, as we used to say, but there is a problem in that dialectic to be sure. Becoming like one's enemy and so forth, fighting on their terrain. The whatever beings are simple beings that have love at their core and happiness in their genes, so the business of destruction has to be rethought, in their way, which is our way. There will be war, there's already war, but we have to be asymmetrical and non-dialectical as we go about it. Asymmetrical: we must fight obliquely and not head on. Non-dialectical: our thought must not be homogeneous with the enemy's thought; in fact, we must break that dialectical bond. We must let the enemy know that, actually we want nothing to do with you, you're nothing to us. But again, who are we? A few months ago in France during the spring demonstrations and other actions against the government, a police car ventured into a street where it shouldn't have and got itself torched. As you can imagine, the justice apparatus went on a rather frantic search for the perpetrators and then brought a handful of suspects into court. There was no real evidence, just ambiguous photos of masked dudes and the opinions of an anonymous undercover cop, but there were convictions and substantial prison sentences. Long prison sentences for torching a car. Well anyway, during that tri-



al just a few days ago, someone or ones cut through the fence of a police depot in Grenoble, a city in France, and set fire to forty police vehicles, completely destroying them. They left a message of solidarity with the young people on trial. The French authorities reacted by formally threatening two websites with closure if they continued to report on the sabotage. I relayed this story on Facebook and a friend liked it but with a sad-face emoji. The thing is, I didn't know if the sad face was for the trial, for the sabotage, or for the threatened censorship. These things are not yet clear among us. Our "we" is undecided.

Returning to the ontological dimension, and to my search for the basis and motivation for revolt against the great social machine, with a view to living fully and well, what I've spoken of so far is a set of whatever beings, according to Agamben. They are not identities, they are examples of being as such, they are eddies in the flow of being, singular expressions of being, singularities. Singularities in this sense are beings without their assigned predicates, such as white/black/ brown, American/ foreign, young/old, man/woman, etc., predicates that group us according to a system of social separations, some of which have been extremely harmful, the ones I've just listed for example. Singularities are not individuals since individualization depends on these existential separations, inclusion in the general group insofar as you are with the others but separate from them, and not just formally but also existentially separate. One can even say that individuals are those beings who are most divided by their predicates. Deleuze called them dividuals to point this up. It's true that the term human is such a predicate itself, signifying the ancient distinction and separation from other living creatures, which humanity excludes as a means of establishing our special existence. And, as you know, this has haunted our status on earth. I'm aware that I have just put a lot on the table



for our occasion here, and it's not possible to handle all of it. For example, I just mentioned social separations and exclusions. This is not an innocent vocabulary, it's more like a house on fire, when you stop to think or study. Race and racism, its ravages, its violence, its prisons. Gender and patriarchal domination of one half of the species. Class and class servitude, where one tenth of the human population seizes possession of eighty percent of what the earth and labor provide, and in the process devas-tates the inner lives of everyone, including their own. This is a good place to have another look at the lovely meme I brought for you. Human figures depicted as stereotypical middle class "citizens," as we say, on a street in some town of the 1950's. The

notorious Fifties of conformism and the atomic bomb. They're caught in the middle of a sudden realization of the unbearable. Of course the inner life can't be pictured, so what we have here is a graphic illustration of its nullification. Let me add this quote from a barista at Starbucks in Las Vegas who would often serve coffee to Mr. Paddock, the mass killer, and his girlfriend, his partner in life. "He would glare down at her and say — with a mean attitude — 'You don't need my casino card for this. I'm paying for your drink, just like I'm paying for you.' Then she would softly say, 'OK' and step back behind him." What I'm getting at is that this was a man, a maleness, who had spent all his days processing and gathering money and turning it into a pitiful male prestige. Then came the realization, sudden or not, that it was all for nothing and he was himself a nothing -- he hadn't lived, he was empty, and it was too late. Thus there was an inner rage against life itself, a resentment acted out in the manner that we know. Now, this is to say that inner lives can be wrecked on a social scale, often with horrific external consequences. Most often, however, the consequences don't achieve that distinction; they're merely dreadful in their banality. One thinks, for example, of something like a great fear and a generalized cowardice, a cheerful cluelessness everywhere in public, an epidemic of depression in private, a PTSD that is not confined to veterans of foreign wars, a racism that makes its own weather and is denied like climate change, or forty million people who remind you that they are individuals with their own opinions before they all say the same thing, such as "That's the way it is, it's just human nature." Untrue on both counts. Thomas Hobbes and other 18th century lies that capitalism needed in order to insinuate itself into hearts and minds. For what is individualism if not a way to acquiesce to one's isolation and powerlessness facing the great social machine? And what is this human nature if not a way to excuse the inexcusable and to deny

our historical potential? As the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins documents using eighteenth century writings by Europeans and the Founding Fathers, who often based themselves on that horrible Greek, Thucydides, and citing counterexamples from tribal societies that he knows, so-called human nature with its innate wickedness and weakness is a construct, a political fiction designed to cement control by sovereign power, and later democratic power. For better or worse, human beings don't have a nature. As Agamben says, they have no assigned mission to accomplish. They are whatever beings. They do need to live together, and so they need to use their evolved language and their thought. Sahlins says that what we have is culture instead, but this is not a comfy, reassuring inheritance, since our Western culture, if we want to call it that, has come up with "human nature", this "perverse idea that endangers our existence," to quote Sahlins.

I'll go with singularities instead. I think this is what Emily Dickinson was saying with her poem, "I'm Nobody": "I'm Nobody! Who are you? Are you – Nobody – too? Then there's a pair of us! Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!" A pair of comrades who make contact in a certain intimacy in defiance of their social subjectivity. Ontologically, as beings, as exemplars of being, they encounter each other apart from their subjectification, which they have deserted, deactivated, decommissioned. Because, as Foucault and many others have reminded us, as social creatures we are molded into subjectivities along certain established lines. As selves, or psychological egos, we have become subjects in relation to certain objects prescribed for us. The general template for this fabricated subjectivity is economic, of course. Subjects that behave according to their self-interests, which are always in competition with the interests of the other selves out there in a menacing world. With such a conception of

the world, there is always the threat that living will turn into surviving, even for those who are said to have everything. You know the setup. Well, Agamben's major lesson, at least for those who find themselves out of tempo with a setup that has no music to speak of, some jingles I suppose—Agamben's lesson is that survivalism is a terrible imposition on humanity; it is the imposition of bare life, or life stripped of its singular form. To absorb this last idea it probably helps to notice all over again that our bodies are absolutely singular; no one else has this body which exists just as it is, this way, in the sensible, sensory world. Actually, our bodies are not something we have but something we are as existants in space and time. As Heidegger said, curse his Nazi soul, we are beings in the world, there is nothing essential separating us from it, and fragments of the world necessarily constitute us. In Spinoza, probably our best Occidental philosopher, bodies move and act in extension, in the material world. Extension is one of the attributes of being. The other, parallel attribute, as concerns humans, is intelligence or thought. We can't go far into Spinoza at this venue, and I'm not prepared to do that anyway, I'm just trying to argue that Agamben's concept of form-of-life is enlightening for radicalization. The ontological attribute of intelligence is an amazing stroke of fortune for humans. It is sheer good luck that among the animals we are the one that can give form to our lives by means of our sensory, rational, emotional intelligence. And this is the source of our joys—I have to say, of our sorrows as well. It's clearly significant that Spinoza's word for that capacity to give form in Latin is *potentia*, as opposed to *potestas*, which only has a derivative status in his theory of substance or being. *Potestas* is power as when we say political power. *Potentia* by contrast means potentiality or capacity although it can also be understood as power like when we say that so and so has a powerful presence, or humans have undiscovered powers. So in truth, *potentia* and

potestas are polar opposites. Potestas is rather ugly and only falsely lovable, whereas potentia is love itself.

In a more recent work, Agamben includes this quote from Spinoza, first Agamben, then the quote: “And in this consists the greatest good that, according to Spinoza, the human being can hope for: ‘a joy born from this, that human beings contemplate themselves and their own potential for acting.’” It’s very interesting that joy arises not from an act, the realization of an act, but from thinking about the potential to carry it out, before, during, and after the act. Think of a dancer and her dance. For her, certainly, the shape or form of the dance exists more firmly within her as potentiality than it does in her action, her performance. Probably the same is true for the spectators who see it. Unfortunately, they live in an externalized society, where things matter more than lives, so they think of the dance as a thing, a spectacle, as much as a form.

There are political entailments or implications to what I’m suggesting. In the first place, in our context here, taking and exercising power is not a goal we can associate with joy or happiness, since power is domination, a continual suppression of potentialities. This has to be the contrary of what revolutionaries desire, especially if they are envisioning a *tiqqun*, a redemption and repair. So there does have to be a revision of revolutionary strategy and revolutionary method. There are signs of that taking place. The aim or object changes. One no longer wants power, which is not desirable except as a perversion or denaturing of that which is desirable. What one does want is what one’s life demands, so that one doesn’t know or maybe even care whether one is in the realm of freedom or the realm of necessity. It is not a demand from Heaven or Hell. Lives require to know and enjoy their potentialities in the world. I think this is not a



*A painting by Mohammed Ansi, a former Guantánamo detainee*

cliché; if it is, it can be unsettled with this reversal : the world demands to know and enjoy its own potentialities. That is, I'm talking about a commonality, a communist condition, which is internal and external at once, within us and out there; it is ontological, if you'll forgive me. Voilà, with Agamben's help, and Spinoza's and Deleuze's, I think I've just come upon the impetus, the motivation, I was looking for. Being is expressed through its potentialities. And we humans experience this as a demand, a kind of pressure, which can be a heavy weight, a spirit of gravity, or more happily something like a good engine pressure, and a motive force: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives my green soul," as Dylan Thomas famously wrote. I'll stay with this theme of potentiality for a moment longer. At the end of his life, Deleuze wrote an essay to define what a life is. A life, a singular life. In a nutshell, he says that a life is a field of virtualities and he calls that field a plane of immanence. Deleuze was a Spinozist to a great degree. Now, according to Spinoza, being or substance is immanent, intrinsic; it is in itself and not in another thing. Therefore as a singular mode of being, a life has its baseline in the flux of becoming, no matter how the

virtualities are actualized. Maybe the significance of this will be sharpened by this true story of three or four Afghani prisoners at the Guantanamo prison camp. They knew they were near the sea but they weren't allowed to see it. They wanted to because they had never seen the ocean. They were not allowed to, no doubt because that would have contradicted their new condition of being nothing at all, subjectively, of being bare lives. So what they did somehow -- I didn't catch that detail -- was to paint the sea as it was in their hearts, on their plane of immanence. I saw just one of the paintings, which was moody, emotional, extraordinary. The field or plane of immanence is not empty, it is populated by intensities, degrees of potential, that have their own configurations and their own consistency. The field is not closed off from the world out there, the extended world. It is affected by the latter, affected most positively when contact with other singular beings increases the potentiality of the field. As you would surmise, multiple positive contacts among multiple singularities on a common plane are capable of producing a compound effect, a compounded potentia, and this has become an insurrectionary communist theorem. From Deleuze, one also learns that trying to inhabit one of the cramped identities that have been assigned to us is to invite the symptoms of an illness. The social roles are begging to be deserted. But how do you desert a subjectivity? That seems like a preposterous notion, until you realize that the self is not really a container. There is that movie playing in our heads all the time but surely our selves are not the characters in our internal movies. The important realization or whatever is that human subjects are ek-static, outside ourselves, we must be outside ourselves as much as within. We are made up of parts of each other, and that should be a positive sense in which we are not alone. So desertion is not so much a matter of retooling ourselves as it is a matter of breaking the grip of capitalist sociality. That sounds



difficult too, I know, I know. Two facts are encouraging, however. The first is that society is fragmenting and finding it harder and harder to enforce the formal togetherness, the false totality; the second is that more and more peeps are becoming aware of society's underlying toxicity, and so are searching for lines of escape from the social kettling, the general hustle, the pressure to become human capital. Those peeps are potential comrades.

To continue, then, and to conclude, communist thought has the aim of de-constituting, disestablishing established power. Power must be de-instituted, and not reconstituted. It must be destituted of its command function. But that is not all, we experience the economic machine itself as a command machine, and that situation cannot remain as it is. Contrary to some readings of its long history, a hundred thousand years or more, the human being has not been essentially a *Homo economicus*, an economic creature. Producing products is not and has never been the main thing in life. We know this in our bones. We do that, produce products, because we have to, we're made to; in a painful sense, we're a product like the other things that are made. In modern production, there is no back and forth between making and contemplating. Thus there is no joy in it. The time between producing and not-producing is spent in forgetting what we have been forced to do. How can such a machine, the economy itself, be de-activated, relegated and backgrounded? I believe revolutionary thought has not reached a clearing or threshold where the question can be addressed. But at least some radical thinkers understand that there can be no true vision of a better, fairer economy, even a socialist one; it's becoming clear, finally, that economy equals capitalism and vice versa. Again, we're not workers, laborers. That is not our vocation. Underneath all that, we're thinkers, dreamers, artists, makers, growers, contemplators, game players, dancers, lovers, celebrators, and, by

freedom and necessity, we're warriors. This last potential cannot be passed over. I think that if desertion is the first order of the day—you know, deserting the ranks of the obedient ones, of capitalism's soldiers of everyday life—much of what is to be done will be in our heads. We must declare our non-adherence, our disloyalty, to most of the public themes and memes, be they governmental or cybernetic. Abandon democratic discourse as well as the cybernetic discourse of ease and comfort and efficiency and entrepreneurship. Recognize that in both cases we're dealing with apparatuses of capture. There is no recipe for this, but it can't be done in isolation, so it will involve a search for our people. The people to come, as Deleuze put it. The people encountered on our line of escape and who may have chosen the same line. Desertion and escape and then what? The question means something different to an escaping warrior than it means to a mere escapee. Destituting, neutralizing the system of power requires many forms of antagonism on our part. One of them, certainly, is exposure, exposing that system for what it is, a totality, a Leviathan. For some reason, and we know the reason, more than discourse is needed. Material contact with the adversary is also required. The art of street antagonism seems to be undergoing a change. It's becoming important now that showing up and making contact with power and its agents cannot just be a matter of demonstrating our hatred; once again, given what I've said, it's more essentially a matter of demonstrating our vitality, of celebrating the increase in our power, our potentiality for acting in concert with other singularities. In this way it will be an affirmation, a kind of glory.