No Time Like the Present

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2016

Tom Nomad has asked me to think about the difference between strategy (as a project that is unavoidably distracted by hypothetical pasts and futures) and tactics (as a necessary attention to the immediacy of the present) . More precisely, Tom has asked me to think about how we think about the difference between strategy and tactics; that is, he has asked me to think philosophically about a difference that is, among much else, itself a radical philosophical difference. Strategic thinking is obsessed by a causality in which the present as such is no more than a more or less unfortunate effect of the past, a continuation of the past as that which determines the entire range of possibility for all futures: the strategist dreams of a world without surprises. Conversely, the future is the object of planning and projects; thus, in strategic thinking, the future is merely a continuation of the present; the present is nothing but the future's past. For the strategist, then, the present is nothing in itself; it is merely the ungraspable and somehow ineffable transition from what is called the past to what is called the future. The tactician, on the other hand, knows it is fatal to be distracted by past or future. More, the tactician knows the present not as a continuous passage from past to future, but as radical contingency. The "present" in its very presence is the essential possibility of difference. Tactics calls for an experience of the present entirely other than the strategist's knowledge of the present. Tactics calls for a knowledge that does not displace the strategist's knowledge, but that is nevertheless another knowledge, another experience of knowing, another experience of experience.

And yet, tactical thinking runs the risk-perhaps unavoidable, to be sure of lapsing into strategy. Tactical thinking risks complicity with strategic thinking at the level of those presuppositions that allow it to make sense at all. That is to say, tactical thinking sometimes makes the same assumptions about the nature of time and space as does strategic thinking; in doing so, it cannot but be seduced by strategy, it cannot but find itself thinking strategically. The strategist cannot but think of a "situation" in relation to the big picture, the whole, from a god's-eye view; in strategy, a situation can only make sense when considered from the perspective of the totality. It is, after all, precisely that relation that determines a strategy. The tactician, of course, does not enjoy the luxury of such transcendence, and must remain focused on the specificity of a given situation. Here, then, the difference between strategy and tactics is quite clear.

Strategists and tacticians alike orient themselves to a situation first of all by means of reference to temporal and spatial coordinates. We say that something happens at a certain place, at a certain time, on a certain date; situations are first of all situated in time and space. This is of course quite

necessary; without reference to temporal and spatial coordinates, neither strategy nor tactics would make any sense at all. But notice that these apparently innocent locatives "at," "in," "where," "when," and all the rest-bear with them the philosophical assumption (without which they would not make any sense at all) that time and space exist anterior to any situation whatever, prior to all happening, all experience, all difference, all becoming. This presumptive priority of time and space necessarily means that the difference between past, present, and future precedes any happening that would in fact actualize the very difference between past, present, and future, the difference that is the very possibility of time (and space). *It is precisely because time and space are supposed to be always already "there" (a priori) that "time" and "space" are nothing but abstractions.* Time, then, is nothing but the abstractions of clock and calendar; place becomes nothing but location, and thus there can be no empirical experience of time and space-except the experience of abstraction. Thus, the present as well becomes nothing but abstraction, a mere point in an infinite series, just like every other point in past and future. There could therefore be no empirical experience of time and space as difference, there therefore could be no sense of "here, now, this."

So, we might phrase our problem in the apparently naive terms of a question: is there a specifically tactical sense of time and space? Even more naively: might there even be a specifically anarchist sense of time and space, a sense that would be irreducible to the abstract concepts of time and space? Might there be a specifically tactical (or even anarchist) experience of the fact that there is time, the fact that there is space? Admittedly, these questions are speculative, but it seems to me that our adventure depends upon such speculations.

To the extent that we think strategically, we can only make sense of a situation (of whatever sort, and however conceived) in relation to totality, the big picture in which, and according to which, everything is obliged to make sense. But in order to make strategic sense of a situation, we necessarily must forget everything that is specific to the unique situation. More, we must of necessity exclude all the singularities of a situation (e.g., *these* bodies, rather than merely "bodies" in their generality) as essentially "irrational :' In other words, all the empirical singularities of the "present" must be excluded-even denounced-in order for strategic thinking to constitute itself as the sole possibility for sense and knowledge. Our question becomes one of how we think about the empirical singularities of the tactical situation, one of how we think about singularity without simply relegating singularity to the realm of the unthinkable. I will approach this question first rather formally by way of a question of numbers; second, by way of the question of the first person pronoun; and then return to questions of time, space, and the presence of the present.

Consider the contradictions of the concept of the number "1." We are most familiar with "l" as the first in the series of whole integers. As such, it is a "numbering number;' that is, a number we use for counting. So familiar are we with this usage that it seems to be self-evident; yet that apparent self-evidence distracts us from some of the complications of the concept. Philosophers have long contemplated the relation (if relation there be) between 0 and 1, between non-being and being; typically, they have turned to theology to account for the movement from non-being to being as accomplished by divine fiat: it is merely a miracle. But the more interesting and relevant difficulty for us is the relation between 1 and 2, the relation between 1 and more-than-1 , *because there is nothing in the concept of "1" that requires a concept of "more-than-1"*. (After all, we learned that "1+1=2" because it was simply asserted to be true; we can no more say why that is so today than when we learned to repeat the assertion as children.) And yet it is in the relation between 1 and more than- 1 that the entire possibility for abstraction, sense, and what counts as

rationality lies. The only thing mathematics cannot account for is the possibility of mathematics, the possibility of what counts for mathematics as reason.

So, yes, the number "1" functions as the first in the series of whole integers, and can thereby be used for counting. But there are two other senses of "1" in which 1 is not a numbering number be cause it does not bring with it the concept of "number." In these other senses of "1," 1 is the number that is also the limit o f number, abstraction, and rationality: "1" not only designates a series, but the impossibility o f a series: "1, 1, 1, 1, …" is not counting, not a series, nor can it ever be a set. From the perspective of arithmetic, "1, 1, 1, 1, …" is merely an absurdity where "1" is not a number at all. In this case, "1" designates singularity, that which is always an *exception* to seriality or totality as such. (Dialectical philosophers beware: exception is not negation.) Singularity is that which cannot be translated into abstraction (including that abstraction which is the *concept* of singularity); it is that which resists translation absolutely. In this sense 1 expresses no partitive relation (as in "one of those;' for example), 1 can never be simply half of 2, or part of "more-than-1 :' One can never say what singularity "is"; therefore, there can be no examples of singularity. Singularity is not *what* it is, but *that* it is. For all these reasons, singularity is said to be absurd or irrational. Which is not to say that singularity does not exist; it is simply to say that empirical singularity is that which cannot be subsumed within the logic that is the condition of possibility for strategic thinking.

There is another sense of "1" that introduces an interesting contradiction. If "1" is at once numbering number and a designation of the singularity that cannot be subsumed within the logic of arithmetic, it is also the designation of the One, the One-All, the indivisible. The indivisible One-All is not the agglutinative sum of its parts (because 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 … only ever = 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 …) , but is *identical* to the innumerable singularities that are exceptions to itself. This contradiction, this tautology, is nonsense for any philosopher trained in strategic thinking. And certainly, this formulation constitutes a limit for what most of us have been trained to regard as "thinkable :' But what if, instead of rejecting the formulation as absurd nonsense (thus affirming our own training in the making of sense as the exclusion of everything else that might count as thinking), we take this formulation to be a call for another experience and practice of thinking? What might this logic of the contradictory identity of the One-All and the innumerable singularities that are exceptions to the One-All help us to think? What is the "use-value " of this challenge? Just, what if?

For most of us, most of the time, nothing seems more certain than the sense that we know what we 'are saying when we use the first person pronoun, "I." After all, what could be more certain, less open to question, than the self-evidence of my existence as identical to itself? If my autoaffectivity, my sense that I am certain I exist, does not count as irrefutable fact, then there are no such things as facts, because-tautologically my presence to myself is my only certainty. And yet, of course, 400 years of continental European philosophy, psychology, and psychoanalysis have taught us to regard such naive empiricism with skepticism (not to mention the occasional supercilious sneer). I think we should hold fast to our empirical tautological autoaffectivity, if not to the naiveté of a certain version of empiricism. Why?

First, let us note that much of the skepticism regarding my certainty that I exist, and that I am identical to myself, stems from a demand that I *prove* that I exist, and that I prove that I exist according to a certain conception of what would constitute "proof' Let us admit straightaway that there can be no logical proof for the existence of the self. But let us also note the curious

character of this demand for proof. First of all, it demands that the "I" be come an object of knowledge *for itself*, and that therefore the proposition that I exist is such that it can either be proved or disproved. The "I" is thereby, willy-nilly, taken to be *nothing but* an object of rational knowledge. It be comes an object of rational knowledge through reflection, that is, rational consciousness be coming conscious of itself as such, by thinking thinking thinking itself. Such objectification of the self for itself is an act of abstraction; the "I" is thereby reduced to being nothing but the capacity for abstraction, for the rationality that it presumptively is. And this is so even when the "I" is said to be constituted both in and as recollection of, and reflection upon its past. Further, note that both as that object which can be known, and as the subject who knows, the "I" is regarded as essentially passive. As subject, the "I" is a purely receptive consciousness, one that plays no part in the constitution of that of which it is conscious. Indeed, all perception, all cognition and understanding, is purely receptive: the "I," construed as the subject that knows itself, never acts, and perception, cognition, and knowing can therefore be conceived therefore as contemplation. As object, as that which is to be perceived, (re)cognized, and understood, the "I" is merely inert; it merely exists in order to verify the essential rationality of the knowing subject. Even if I perceive my self to be "irrational;' the very perception of my self as "irrational" nevertheless simply reasserts the mastery of the rational "I." Insofar as the reflective self can only be rational, the "I" can never in fact be conceived as empirical singularity.

Second, thinking about the "I" and what it designates most often begins and ends with the question of its quiddity, its "whatness": what is the self? The rarely examined presupposition of this question is that "the self" designated by the "I" is a "what;' possessed of qualities and characteristics that can be predicated of "the self," rendering selves classifiable, and thereby objects for knowledge and the understanding. The "I" is always summoned to identify itself in terms of its presumptive quiddity; thereby, "the self" becomes the object of policing; "the self" in this sense has always been the object of profiling and control, the object of every philosopher-cop's mastery.

What if, however, the "I" and "the self" which is its presumptive referent are something quite other than the object of the philosopher-cop's B&D fantasies? What if, that is to say, the "I" refers to something quite other than the epistemological object of an essentially passive reflection and contemplation, something quite other than a certain "whatness" that is possessed of attributes that renders selves classifiable and subject to control? What if "I"="1"? What if at least certain deployments of the first person pronoun simply mark the event of empirical singularity, not the quiddity of a thing, but a presence, an autoaffectivity irreducible to reflection and knowledge? How would we think about the "I" then, in the mode of speculation, rather than that of the production of knowledge? Let us note in passing that this "I" of our speculations does not render the subjectivity of the self which is produced as both object and subject of knowledge either nonexistent or false. We simply pay attention to that which had to be ignored, or dismissed as irrelevant, or even disavowed, in order to reduce the singularity of the "I" to abstract rationality; we ourselves need not disavow rationality in some celebratory irrationalism in order to think about what of empirical singularity necessarily exceeds a particular version of Reason.

Let us return to the idiosyncratic "1" of our perverse philosophy of arithmetic in order to pursue the speculative proposition that "I"="1." We are very well aware-painfully aware-how the 'T' can function as the "1" *qua* numbering number; we all know too well the effects of being counted in one census or another in order to be subsumed within a "population :' That version of the "I" *qua* "1" needs no further attention here. But the "I" that at once designates singularity

and the One-All does. In my empirical singularity I am autonomous-literally, a law unto myself. This autonomy does not concern the will or willfulness of an ego, but the fact that my singular existence cannot be deduced from anything else; nothing leads the world to predict my existence. Certainly, I am the result of certain biological affective processes, but all one can deduce from those processes is the birth of a child, not the empirical existence of this body, this mind. In this sense, the "I," my "I" is "cause of itself" (causa sui, as theologians say of one or another god). In this case, all that can be said of the "I" is that it is identical to itself, a tautology that marks the limit of the possibility of philosophy. This means that the singular "I" cannot be said to share any characteristics or qualities with other entities; singularities cannot as such be gathered together to form a population. Thus, the "I" always designates not an example, but an exception to the world conceived as (rational) totality. This constitutes the autoaffectivity of empirical singularities, a sense of self that is not the logical conclusion of consciousness reflecting on itself. Neither, therefore, can it be conceived in any psychological reductionism as merely narcissistic ego.

A singularity is *that* it is, rather than *what* it is, and as such is identical to itself. Yet at the same time, we can only think about singularities in terms of not being what they are not. That is, we can only think about singularity as exception, or anomaly, or (in the strong sense of the term) idiosyncrasy: singularity can only be conceived of as that which it is not. It is *not*, in fact, all the other innumerable singularities whatever. The "I" is that which is without-relation-but that being-without-relation is itself precisely a *relation*. The relation to all other innumerable empirical singularities is in fact this being-without-relation that is relation, and it is this relation of being-without-relation among all empirical singularities that in fact constitutes the One-All. The One-All can only be conceived, then, as difference from itself, an incessant becoming other than "itself," which is to say that the One-All is dynamic becoming: it is in perpetual flux. The One-All has no existence before, after, above, or below its articulation in and as innumerable empirical singularities. Conversely, empirical singularities exist only as exceptional articulations of the One-All. The One-All (something like "the world") is the necessary presupposition of empirical singularity (something like the "I"); conversely, the world necessarily presupposes the singularity of innumerable "I"s. This brings us to an interesting tautology: everything causes everything. The "I" then emerges from the mutual affectivity of all innumerable empirical singularities. (To avoid confusion here, let me say I define "affectivity" as the power to affect-physically, intellectually, emotionally, in any manner whatever and to be affected by all other singularities, in other words, "everything.") In the mutual affectivity of innumerable singularities, I emerge from the world in a movement of radical separation that in fact constitutes the world as such. There are two important consequences here: first, we must acknowledge that the "I" is in no respect, and certainly not essentially, passive; second, that singularities and the One-All are temporal, historical phenomena. The "I" is neither passive nor transcendent.

The classic, but still typical philosophical conception of perception, cognition, understanding, and learning is a thoroughly pedagogical model in which what is perceived by the senses, (re)cognized, understood, and learned is essentially inert; the senses simply download the world for knowledge. Concomitantly, the "I" that perceives, (re)cognizes, understands, and learns is a pure, passive receptivity that somehow exists outside the world that is learned. But for the "I" that emerges in the mutual affectivity of innumerable singularities, however, perception, cognition, understanding, and learning are the work of an active intuition of the world, all acts of appropriation. Clearly, for example, there is nothing whatever that is passive about learning to walk, swim, ride a bicycle, or speak a language. In learning to swim, for example, we appropriate

the water as habitus for our bodies, but we are also appropriated by the water, such that we exist in synergy with the water. When we learn to speak a language, we take the language for our own, but at the same time we are appropriated by the language, we are spoken by the language. We do not merely see, hear, taste, smell, or touch something: these are all acts of appropriation, and in those acts of appropriation, we ourselves are appropriated. Indeed, all of these innumerable acts of appropriating and being appropriated (i.e. mutual affectivity) constitute the "I"; there is no I, no subject, that either precedes or survives this general circulation of the affects: the empirical singularity of the "I" exists only in this mutuality of appropriation. Further, it is in this process alone that the world, the One-All, is constituted.

The philosopher's tendency has most often been to speak of the "I," a sense of self, and the subject constituted in reflection upon the self, as *if* both the "I" and the One-All were stable entities, possessed of an unchanging essence, essentially outside of historical becoming, "in" time and space, but in fact essentially atemporal. But it is precisely the essentially temporal nature of the general circulation of the affects that articulates singularities. It is because the articulation of singularities transpires in and as becoming that singularities are in fact historical singularities. That is, what is singular-the empirical-is caught up in the irreversibility of becoming : the term "historical" here simply indicates that irreversibility. At this point, the sense of our characterization of the One-All as constituted in the articulation of empirical singularities that are exceptions to the One -All becomes clear : the One-All is simply the irreversible-historical-metamorphosis of innumerable singularities (or the self-organization of entities in states far from equilibrium, what we nickname "life") . Here it little matters whether one characterizes this process as entropy, decay, "death," or as energetic growth or "life." The point is that it orients all singularities as such toward a radical difference from the present; indeed, singularity is that orientation.

Two points bear emphasis here. First, the presentation so far may perhaps have reinforced the impression that the affectivity of mutua appropriations and the articulation of singularities occurs "in" time and space, as if time and space were empty abstractions that somehow antedate all existence. On the contrary, the articulation of singularities in the interactions of appropriation is the original "experience" of time-and-space. (This "experience" is of course by no means limited to the human, nor even to the animate; least of all is it merely-or even essentially-a matter of what is called subjective consciousness.) In other words, abstractions of clock, calendar, and spatial grids are neither the possibility nor measure of the experience of time; they are simply abstractions, derived from the mechanics of classical physics, that purport to render the experience of time-and-space rational. "Time-and-space" could never be conceptualized without the original experience of becoming-singular, that is, the original experience of an orientation to the radical difference of futurity.

Second, if the One-All is simply the irreversibility of metamorphosis and change of innumerable exceptional singularities, that is, if the One-All is essentially historical, then it must be the case that no "laws of nature" are themselves immutable, nor are they necessarily universal. The aspiration to discover and understand the eternal and universal laws of nature (or, the "mind of God") is a specifically theological ambition. It is mere faith that persuades us that nature and the universe are constituted according to principles that transcend all becoming and all history. The most that can be claimed (and it is a necessary and important claim, not to be simply dismissed) is that what we call the "laws of nature" are simply the most persuasive formulation of our understanding, for us, here and now, of certain apparently regular phenomena. It is not simply a matter of acknowledging our own historical limits, but of realizing that the One-All is more radically

historical than we imagine ourselves to be. With all this in mind, let us return to our questions of presence and the present, and of what this might imply for our thin king about tactics.

We are all familiar, of course, with a concept of time as a presumptively infinite continuity punctuated at equal intervals by calculable discontinuities (seconds, minutes … millenia, etc.). We all know, and have to live much of our lives according to, the abstract metronomic precision of the clocks and calendars that are the measure of this continuity of discontinuities. We also know, of course, that even though our lives are in large part regulated by clock and calendar, no entity has actually experienced "time" in this way, except as the infinite repetition of an unchanging series that is without effective difference. But if "time" is nothing but an infinite continuity of discontinuities, an infinite repetition of the Same, then we could never have any sense of the irreversibility of time (that is, "time" as irreversibility), we could never distinguish between past, present, and future. So, what is it that makes it possible to make that differentiation, to have a sense *that there* is "time"?

We can only have a sense of the effective difference between past, present, and future if there is that which interrupts the infinite boredom of the unchanging series of discontinuities; there must be that which *exceeds* the series, and makes it possible. In others words, there must be a singularity, an originality in the strong sense of the term, that makes a sense of time possible. That singularity (original in that at all points it provokes-and thus is the origin of-time) is the present. Not unlike "I" in our perverse philosophy of arithmetic, the present occupies its place in a series, but is also an exception to the series that makes the series possible. The present is that singularity that is at once the possibility and limit of "time." The present, which is "in" time, is also something other than "time"; the present possesses breadth, and thus is spatial as the limit of time. The present is at all times the original singularity that is the genesis of time altogether: the present is the eternal Big Bang, as it were. The present is the One-All of all singular presents, a temporality that always radically exceeds itself.

If all this is so, it is because there is no empirical self-evident presence outside of the present. The past has no presence except in its effects and recollection in the present; the future has no presence save in its anticipation in the present. The past is only ever the past-in-the-present, the future is only ever the future-in-the-present. Like that singularity designated by the "I," the present, as singularity, we take to be self-evident; we assume that in one way or another, our experience of "now" is certain, as undoubtedly certain as our experience of "I," or of "here." But also like that singularity designated by the "I," the present in its very presence is ta ken to be ungraspable, even ineffable, something that escapes epistemological objectivity for consciousness, something that exceeds its abstraction. But as we have seen with the "I," the presence of the present is ungraspable or ineffable only from the perspective of a knowing that insists that abstraction is the only possibility of knowledge, and that therefore any empirical experience of the "I," the "now;' or "here" -which is to say, of the present in its presence-is either unknowable or merely quasi-mystical mumbo jumbo. Our speculation, of course, is that the present is graspable, that it is quite effable indeed, *but only on condition that it is known as something other than rational abstraction on the part of subjects defined precisely by their capacity for rationality and abstraction.* There are any number of disciplines that bring us to an experience and a knowledge (whether conscious or not makes little difference) of the present in its presence. Practices of "meditation" in Zen Buddhism, for example, are disciplines of coming to an experience of the

empirical present in its radical originality and singularity. (There are, of course, many other quite different examples : I leave a catalogue of such practices to such others as may be interested.)

Of course, there is certainly nothing extraordinary about such experience and knowledge; indeed, that experience and knowledge is the condition of all existence. It's simply that we don't often (if ever) reflect that we experience and know the singular, original presence of the present. If we had no such knowledge, we could not possibly survive; indeed, all that lives must experience and know this present as the rupture that is at once the possibility and limit of our experience of time. Several of the sciences, of course, will explain such behaviors with references to instinct, or DNA coding, or conditioning, or chemical triggers, or various concepts of the neurosciences. Perhaps such references are all accurate (perhaps). But they are quite beside the point for our purposes, because they do not take up the question of the experience of instinct, or the rush of adrenalin as the effect of a certain experience of singularity, and so forth. What does matter for us, is that we are talking about experiences of the present as experiences of radical contingency.

It is at this point, I hope, that the pertinence of all this to the question of tactics becomes clear, for if there is one thing that distinguishes tactics from strategy, it is that strategists haven't a clue how either to conceptualize or to negotiate the present as radical contingency. For strategists, contingency can be nothing more than accidental tragedy; but tactics emerge from the essential contingency at the heart of the immediate situation, from the presence of the present. Dogs may not be able to read a map, but they are capable of following all the contingencies of the olfactory signals that constitute a "trail"; few birds have advanced degrees in geology, but they take to the sky when an earthquake is still beyond the ken of the seismologist. Those beings we call animals make lousy strategists, but tacticians can learn much from their ability to negotiate that radical contingency we call the present. Again, this is not to displace or disavow the knowledge of the cartographer or the geologist; it is to say that in the immediate presence of a situation, such knowledge too easily becomes impediment. Just try reviewing the history of automotive engineering the next time your car goes into a skid, and see how much that helps.

The best tactician is something of a Zen guerilla, aware of the situation as something other than a temporal, spatial location, because t he tactician is open to contingency as the advent of a futurity that is completely unexpected, completely inexplicable according to existing protocols of understand; the tactician is open to-indeed, affirms-futurity as radical difference, a difference so complete that it is incomprehensible to any version of the present as extension of the past; the tactician affirms the presence of the present as the rupture that at once exceeds and constitutes the One-All. Such an affirmation can only be experienced as the violence of singularities in their mutual appropriation. Tactics is the discipline of learning how to affirm the present as a becoming oriented toward a futurity it will not be for us to know; tactics is the art of making it happen.

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Retrieved on 25th May 2021 from libgen.rs
Published in *Insurgencies: A Journal on Insurgent Strategy* Vol. 2.

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