

REFLECTIONS ON ACTIVE HISTORY

Disappointment, Nihilism, and Engagement: Some Thoughts on Active History

Stuart Henderson - York University

In the summer of 2008, I taught an intensive six-week course at McMaster University on the United States and the 1960s.¹ Combining aspects of political, social, and cultural history, this course was mainly designed to illustrate the era as defined by a battle over subjectivity. The post-existentialist New Left movements, the Fanon-inspired minority power advocates, the anarchist radical feminists, the post-Marxist student politicians, all of this political activity is reducible in a certain sense to the dialectic between the authentic and the alienated subject. This can be phrased in many different ways, and certainly was back then, but the end result was generally the same – what was at stake in the dedicated social and political movements of the 1960s was the fate of the political subject; is she free? And, by whose definition do we measure this freedom?

In our present age, which is permeated by widespread alienation and escapism, it would seem that such debates would still find open ears and minds in the classroom. But, this is not always the case. While I want to say upfront that I have met students and other young people who show every sign of being committed, innovative, and indefatigable political actors, they are hardly in the majority. Indeed, they are too often the thrilling exception to the more disheartening rule. And while I, like you, am overjoyed at the outpouring of youthful energy and support that was shown to Barack Obama during his candidacy, I must admit to a fairly serious set of reservations about the great hope for the young Left being embodied in the leader of the hardly non-establishment Democratic Party of the United States. Disappointment seems inevitable.

I have taught that 1960s course, or variations on it, for five years. I have taught versions which solely considered the United States, versions which were focused on Canada in those years, and a version which attempted a “North American 1960s.” In each instance, I have received at least one email, note, or office hours’ visit which reflected the disappointment of one or more of my students over the seeming implausibility of such earnest 60s-era activism in our present age. During the summer of 2008, one of my mature students (whose age I will estimate at between 50 and 55) sent me the following email after a particularly charged lecture in which I showed footage of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964.

Hi Professor Henderson,

37

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38 Henderson

I really enjoyed the film about the Berkeley students' protest on Monday night - I remember the 60's very well, and it brought back great memories. As you know, this type of thing happened on many campuses in North America - even here at McMaster!

After the film when we were leaving, I overheard a couple of remarks from students which suggested they saw the protests in a cynical light - I was a little surprised, since I felt it was so moving. A similar thing happened in a class earlier this year when we were discussing images from the Greenpeace advertising campaign, and many students thought that the demonstrators were "crazy hippies in zodiacs."

As I thought about those two incidents, it occurred to me that there doesn't seem to be much student activism any more. Surely there are many injustices and marginalized people in the world today, yet few youth or student protests seem to be in the news.

Is it because our society seems to be wrapped up in other things, like materialism? Just wondered if you have a theory.

Here is what I wrote back, and then worked up into a section of my lecture on the legacies of the period:

Dear [Student],

All of that 60s activism seems, to so many people, to have come to nothing. And so, to their endless discredit, they have given up. They see the present system as intractable: the push of disaster capitalism, of anti-environmentalism, of materialism, of anti-intellectualism, of corporatization, of militarism, of nihilism. They see all of this as simply inevitable. So, they either embrace it (looking for rewards), or they seek comfort in making fun of those who aim to attack the system (while they continue to be victimized by that same old system).

You'll note that I didn't leave much room for hope. Unsatisfied with this bit of knee-jerk professoring, I turned to the bookshelf for the rest of the summer.

Simon Critchley and the Ethical Demand

This little reading project culminated in my re-discovery of British philosopher Simon Critchley. An uncommonly lucid academic, Critchley offers us a helpful way of approaching the tangled issue that I pretended to dispense in a few short sentences in that email. In much of his work since 1999, and most explicitly in 2007's near-manifesto *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, Critchley wrestles with the problem that he believes to be central to the current malaise. This is, as it was for Nietzsche, whose definitions he follows and builds upon, the problem of nihilism as a response to the present condition, a situation characterized by *disappointment*.²

According to Critchley, there are two distinct kinds of disappointment,

Disappointment, Nihilism, and Engagement 39

and each breeds a different response. Religious disappointment (which can be roughly approached as the fallout from the post-Nietzschean God-is-Dead crisis of meaning) is here juxtaposed against political disappointment (which is something like the way you might feel when you consider the environmental catastrophe that is the Alberta oil sands, the fairly casual public response to evidence that the U.S., and possibly Canada, tortures prisoners of war, the general popular support for the repressive police actions during the G20 weekend in 2010, or the apparent fact that Sarah Palin, a hyper-elite representative of the American people, does not believe in evolution, archeology, or global warming).

Religious disappointment then leads us from the question of meaning (why?) to the problem of nihilism (no meaning!). This nihilism, as Critchley reminds us (again, following Nietzsche), can take two forms, the passive and the active. In his words:

Rather than acting in the world and trying to transform it, the passive nihilist simply focuses on himself and his particular pleasures and projects for perfecting himself... In the face of the increasing brutality of reality, the passive nihilist tries to achieve a mystical stillness, calm contemplation: European Buddhism [in Nietzsche's words]. In a world that is all too rapidly blowing itself to pieces, the passive nihilist closes his eyes and makes himself into an island.³

This is an important and helpful definition, not least because it underscores the key point that the passive nihilist is by no means a benign actor. It isn't okay to be disconnected, to be solely focused on seeing heaven in a wildflower, perfecting your warrior pose, achieving inner peace, eating and praying and loving, or whatever. If self-amelioration is your only contribution to the politics of resistance, you are actually hurting people.

Reality TV, Hyper-Reality, and LaineyGossip.com

It seems clear that students are inclined today toward an unproblematized interest in forms of popular cultural production that reinforce this passivity. If, as Jean Baudrillard liked to emphasize, a simulacrum is not a copy of the real, but rather becomes truth in its own right, what might we conclude about the preponderance of "Reality Television"? It is surely of some consequence that such hyper-real entertainments have become this generation's answer to MTV.⁴ Featuring performances that skirt the line between pure theatricality and Brechtian performativity, the political meaning of such scripted hyper-reality TV shows as the *Bachelor* seems tied to the experience of sublimation. Our dislike or distaste for most of the "characters" we watch on such programs is a central reason we find them enjoyable – we are, at the root, sublimating our intellectual distaste for such vapid entertainments because they help us to validate our own feelings of superiority.⁵

Part of what we liked about a show such as *The Hills*, for instance, is that

40 Henderson

it was about an imaginative hyper-reality in which beautiful wealthy people could be mocked and judged and disparaged. It makes us feel good to do this because it allows us to pretend (or, because this is supposed to be “reality”, to *know*) that we’re better than them. We pick the one with whom we identify and then take up the weirdly empty political position of their defender and booster, whether as we are watching the program, or, and this is perhaps the scary bit, in conversations around the dinner table with perfectly intelligent people. (This is also, probably, why Jerry Seinfeld’s program *The Marriage Ref* didn’t work: it reversed this approach, pitting judgmental celebrities against hapless everymen. Here we couldn’t identify with anyone, and just felt lousy.) In short, what many of us are concerned about is that our students, and let’s face it, many of us are less likely to know anything about the current political situation in our home province, than about the relative merits of the gastrophiles on *Top Chef*. And, that this is entirely socially acceptable.⁶

To take the reality show metaphor to its obvious extreme, how many of us know more intimate details about Lindsay Lohan’s public performance of celebrity than we do about, say, Dalton McGuinty or Lester B. Pearson’s respective careers? How many of us know what Lindsay wrote about Scarlett Johansson on that bathroom wall a couple years ago?⁷ Now, how many of us know why Pearson’s nickname was Mike?⁸ Neither bit of trivia matters much, of course. But I fear that more young people would vote, confidently and with much greater relish, in a general election over whom is more handsome – Robert Pattinson or Taylor Lautner – than over who should be our next premier. Since democracy demands participation, and participation demands informed citizens, this kind of thing concerns us.

So, is what Critchley refers to as passive nihilism simply intellectual laziness? The supposed “dumbing down” of culture? Or, isn’t this just what popular culture has always done? And, anyway, isn’t it an elitist argument to maintain that people don’t like what they like because they like it, but rather because of some false consciousness business? The answer is of course yes to all of these questions. Passive nihilism is quite easily explained through the pervasiveness of intellectual laziness, but this is nothing new (as we all know). And, yes, pop culture is about entertainments – and entertainments (or taste in entertainments) don’t reflect intelligence or social value and never have. Again, this we all know. And, yes, this is an elitist argument in every way – but, let’s not run from that. I, for one, *like* elites, experts, clever people who teach me stuff, cultural critics who remind me why it’s always worth thinking about what we do, examining this life we have decided is worth living, after all. If elites are ghastly, insulting, archaic (as is the persistent cry from the false avatars of working class Canadians such as Stephen Harper) then what the heck are we doing, in the company of the bourgeoisie elite of this academic discipline?⁹

One all-too-common preoccupation of the passive nihilist in public life is to disparage the elites while celebrating the common citizen.¹⁰ Indeed, this is, I'll argue, the central joy of poring over celebrity magazines and *LaineyGossip.com* and the like. As much as we might love to admire those stars for their beauty and talent, we *clearly* love us some scandal even more. Meanwhile, the world gets more complicated, politics get muddier, the ioe caps melt, the rich get richer, and the wars go on. But take comfort: the common man can't do anything about any of it anyway, right?

This is, then, the passive nihilist: letting bad things happen, letting people get hurt, being sad about it, failing to act. But, if Angelina Jolie has an affair with Ryan Gosling, you'll be the first to know.

Active Nihilism and Our Very Own Bazarov

Meanwhile, the active nihilist is out there *actively* hurting people. "The active nihilist," writes Critchley, "also finds everything meaningless, but instead of sitting back and contemplating, he tries to destroy this world and bring another into being."¹¹ At the present time, it is al-Qaeda that Critchley identifies as the "quintessence" of active nihilism: "al-Qaeda uses the technological resources of capitalist globalization – elaborate and coded forms of communication, the speed and fluidity of financial transactions, and obviously transportation – against that globalization."¹² In other words, al-Qaeda is as much a product of this era as are the scores of people at home right now playing *Call of Duty* on their Reading Week. This active nihilistic response is not new either. It seems to be a reflection of late-stage and atrophied civilizations or social orders (late-Rome, late-Czarist Russia, late-America, millennial religious movements everywhere), but this genealogy is too much for me to speculate on here.

Still, we can look back to Ivan Turgenev's 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons* (which offers the first nihilist in literature, supposedly, in the pompous character of Bazarov) and see a weirdly prescient discussion of today's nihilistic activism.¹³ Indeed, Bazarov – whom Turgenev devised as a characterization of the young politicians of the post-Crimean War era, those who sought to destroy rather than reform Russia – can be seen and heard reflected today in bin Laden's nefarious jihad. Bazarov, like bin Laden, repeatedly condemns the world, seeking to sweep away the compounded assumptions of social, political, emotional, and spiritual life – in a word, culture. Bazarov's prime mover was science – he was trained as a doctor – and he was as coldly absolute in his adherence to his science as bin Laden is to his Islam.

Bazarov even refuses love – in science "love" is explained as mere instinct and physical need. When he and his impressionable sidekick Arkady first see Anna Odin-sova at the governor's ball, Arkady is immediately attracted to her.

Bazarov, on the other hand, regards her as though through a microscope. As the two go to meet her, Bazarov actually says, "Let's see what species of Mammalia this person belongs to."¹⁴ Lost to the world as it is, Bazarov – like the active nihilists of our time – sees things through the distorting prism of his absolutism. The world is to be remade, and violence is the only likely way of bringing this about. Love can be reduced to emotionless responses (science, or the will of Allah), politics reduced to instinctive self-interest (or, again, God's will). The active nihilist can justify anything, any atrocity or horror, because she is a slave to her absolute disbelief in anything beyond her chosen god. But, if Turgenev could have Bazarov killed by his own beliefs – he contracts typhus while performing an autopsy – we are less comfortable with such poetic justice today.

It is probably not a coincidence that one of the biggest hit movies of the past few years, *The Dark Knight*, pits the principles of western justice against the active nihilist in a battle over meaning in the world. That the film's resolution is gloomy in the extreme (relying as it does on the successful use of illegal wiretapping, and culminating in the deterioration of a steadfast symbol of righteousness into a vengeful fatalist) demonstrates our discomfort with the complexity of ethical life, and our veritable expectations of disappointment.

Two Experiences of Disappointment

Critchley elaborates two distinct ways in which we experience disappointment: religiously and politically. In the first instance, we can read the basic narrative of the past 150 years in Western, and increasingly, Eastern, metaphysics. Religious disappointment is, say, the discovery that god lets bad things happen to good people. This leads to a crisis of meaning: what is the meaning of life if god is so cold and inert and distant? Perhaps then we turn away from religion at this moment, turn to science, or even to nothing at all, because the answer to the fundamental question *what is the meaning of life?* seems to be: *nothingness*. Now, what do we do with this despair, this crisis in which nothingness seems to be the root of all? We turn to passivity or to activity. But, either way, we find ourselves to be profoundly out of synch with the world around us. And so, in both cases, we retreat to an escapism (which often means a strengthened, more dogmatic approach to religion) which allows us to pretend to exist outside of the world as it is.

The second road from disappointment flows through political experience, and is much less easily accessed since the religious crisis tends to precede the political crisis for most people. But, if we either have no religion, or have otherwise bypassed this concern, we shall still suffer political disappointment. Here we find ourselves up against the question of justice – we are (perhaps) affluent, educated, secure, and yet we see social calamities all around us, from homelessness to teen pregnancy to sexual double standards to racism. We watch our nations go to wars and terrorize and kill civilians in the name of this justice. This causes us pain,

and confusion, and disillusionment. From here we can either do nothing (which appears to be simpler, but is eventually crushing) or we can turn to ethical engagement in the world, to seek justice for those whom we have injured.¹⁵

Political Disappointment and the Way Out

So, if religious disappointment leads to the question of meaning and then to nihilism (Critchley reminds us Nietzsche's infamous phrase: "Christians and other nihilists"), political disappointment leads us to the question of justice and from there to ethics. It is in this ethical arena that activism – progressive, political engagement – exists.¹⁶

At the risk of oversimplifying some fairly heavy ideas: all of this dangerous nihilism must be replaced by ethical engagement. The world may be meaningless, but ethical engagement is not. Our task, then, is to find ways of underlining the importance, or (to use Critchley's term) the *demand*, for ethical engagement, while resisting the alluring response of nihilism. As Ernesto Laclau has argued, in an elaboration on Critchley's theory of the demand: "If we say that there is a radical distinction between the 'is' and the 'ought', this distance between the two is precisely what constitutes the space of ethics."¹⁷

It seems to me that there are two interrelated approaches that we might take up, that might overcome, or at least, combat the passive nihilism of many of today's students. First, we might engage in a celebration of ethics, of the "ought", rather than wallowing in some relativist refusal of the concept. People are afraid of ethics, seeing them as too thorny and too abstruse to discuss. Just watch people shrink like leeches under salt when you bring up ethics in a political conversation. But, ethics *can* be repositioned at the centre of this discourse: understand that around the world, as here at home, people are suffering, dying, and experiencing terrible injustice, and that you, most likely, are *benefiting* from this. Do you feel a demand to make that stop? That, in its essence, is the space between the "is" and the "ought". This demand is an ethical response.

Second, we might consider pushing students away from giggling at earnest approaches to political change – interrogating any automatic responses to activism as "something other people do" or, even more reductively, "something hippies do" (perhaps in zodiacs). This means pushing students to consider why their culture takes such a dim view of earnest political action. What I mean by this is the all-too-common cultural approach to activism as humorous, as uncool, or, worse, as *humourously uncool*. There is a creeping commonsense among many students today that any active engagement in the politics of the Left is, in a social sense, terminal. It means dressing like *that*, and talking like *that*, and wearing my hair like *that*, and throwing out my Nickelback records, or whatever.¹⁸

It is not of negligible significance that yoga has become both the fastest

growing exercise activity of the past decade, especially among students, and a generator (in the form of fashions, teachers' programs, and in classes themselves) of extraordinary wealth. Yoga, as an example of a passive nihilistic response to the present situation, is extraordinarily *cool* right now. A pseudo-spiritual quasi-globalized self-help fitness amalgam, yoga represents a variety of desirable activities.¹⁹

But, it is worth remembering that yoga, along with the inner child, and Zen, and New Age, and most importantly, the Born Again Christian phenomenon, all achieved widespread popularity in the early 1970s, in the shadow of the greatest disappointment for leftist activists since the collapse of the Popular Front in the 1940s. As the retrospective trope of declension took hold for many former 1960s radicals – that is, as they grappled with the possibility that they had been fighting for nothing, and that things were maybe even worse now than before – the 1970s saw the rise of a series of manifestations of passive nihilism from separatist hippie communes to cultural feminism, to what sociologist Sam Binkley has diagnosed as a general turn away from community and toward self-improvement.²⁰ So, in other words, this isn't a new phenomenon, but it *is*, in these dark times, more dangerous than ever.

The late, lamented, David Foster Wallace once defined the “pure, late-date American” as someone who is “alien, ignorant, greedy for something [she] cannot have, and disappointed in a way [she] can never admit.”²¹ But, philosophy, Critchley stresses, begins in that disappointment. Activism, of course, also begins in that disappointment – this is what Beckett famously referred to as the “I can't go on; I'll go on” moment – and so does the drive toward ethical engagement in the world, an active approach to transforming it, to battling injustice, brutality, horror, inequality.²² But, we must beware, nihilism begins in disappointment as well, and it seems bound only to lead to wicked, nightmarish, ends.

Naomi Jaffe, a member of the Weather Underground, once defended the violence of her organization by bouncing the active approach off of its passive corollary: “We felt that doing nothing in a period of repressive violence is itself a form of violence. If you sit in your house... and allow the country that you live in to murder people and to commit genocide, and you sit there and you don't do anything about it, that's violence.”²³ While I categorically reject the broken logic which brought Jaffe and her companions to redress this passive violence with an equally nihilistic *active* violence, I cannot disagree with her assessment of the implication of passive obedience. Nihilism is violence.

But we, as professors and professors-to-be, have the pulpit, the power, and the intellectual passion to help students break out of their escapist routines. We, as emissaries of neither the religious nor the political spheres of influence, have a perhaps unique role to play in their deliberations, in their politico-intellectual development. As active historians, this is our calling, our opportunity. This is our hope.

NOTES

¹I read an early version of this paper at the Active History Conference at Glendon College, September 27-28, 2008. This newer, much-expanded, version of the paper was first given as the closing presentation of the New Frontiers Conference at York University, February 21, 2009. It has been slightly updated for this publication.

²Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (New York: Verso Books, 2007). What follows is, obviously, deeply influenced by his ideas.

³Critchley, 4.

⁴"It is always a false problem to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum." Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 27. It's worth noting that the deeply disappointed Baudrillard himself claimed to be a nihilist. "There is no more hope for meaning," Baudrillard, 164.

⁵Umberto Eco defined hyper-reality (in part) as the "absolute fake" that is fabricated as a stand in for the authentic reality. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, translated by William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1986), 7-8.

⁶To be sure, I do not endorse the anti-popular culture screeds such as Susan Jacoby's *The Age of American Unreason*, with their insulting and reactionary take on the creeping influence of non-white, non-Ivy League entertainments. Take for example Jacoby's complaint that, when a certain politician, "brought up in a conservative Republican household in an upper-middle-class suburb of Chicago, utters the word 'folks', she sounds like a hovering parent trying to ingratiate herself with her children's friends by using teenage slang" (Jacoby, 4). What sounds for a moment like it might be a criticism of a pandering politician employing populist language is really a statement about a wealthy white woman who should know better than to use Southern (black) slang.

⁷You don't want to know. Trust me.

⁸It was his nickname in the Royal Flying Corps.

⁹Recall Harper's smear campaign against Stephane Dion in 2008 – the Liberal leader was repeatedly targeted for being "bookish" and a "professor" as though these were black marks on his resume. The famous image of Dion standing in front of a blackboard (with or without bird poop on his shoulder) defined the Conservative approach. See, for example,

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canadavotes/story/2008/09/09/leaders-preview.html>

¹⁰Sarah Palin has built her career out of mining this approach. See:

http://www.salon.com/news/politics/sarah_palin/index.html?story=/opinion/walsh/politics/2010/02/11/sarah_palin

¹¹Critchley, 5.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons: A Norton Critical Edition*, translated by Michael R. Katz (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996 [1862]).

¹⁴Turgenev, 58.

¹⁵Critchley, 5-9.

¹⁶Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, translated by Walter Kauffman (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 272.

¹⁷Ernesto Laclau, "Ethics, Politics and Radical Democracy: A Response to Simon Critchley", *Culture Machine* Vol.4, 2002. <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/268/253>

¹⁸Incidentally, throwing out your Nickelback records is probably a good idea, whatever the case.

¹⁹Critchley: "Nothing has any meaning, therefore I'll affirm the void, and I'll engage in practices of the self - yoga, tantric sex...". http://www.necronauts.org/interviews_simon.htm

²⁰Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

²¹David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster" in *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2005), 240 (footnote 6).

²²Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2010), 175-6. The longer quote which

46 Henderson

ends the novel: "...it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." See also Critchley, 44.

²³ See the film: *Weather Underground*, directors: Bill Siegel and Sam Greene, New Video Group, 2004.