

Spartacus

R-existence and repetition

Spartacus is revealed as the most splendid fellow in the whole of ancient history. Great general (no Garibaldi), noble character, real representative of the ancient proletariat.

Letter from Marx to Engels (London, 27 February 1861)

A century has passed by since a handful of insurgents (January 5, 1919) in Berlin rises in revolt (on the wake/on the heels of Lenin's victory), against the legacy of the Great War, still feeding the militarist existence of post-imperial Germany. While the social-democratic government in charge is protesting against this sudden rebellion, members of the Spartacus League take part in an uprising ending with a bloody defeat and revealing that the newly born Weimar Republic is still heavily entangled/enmeshed with the authoritarian soul of the Second Reich.

On 15 January 1919, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the two leading figures of the Spartacus League, were killed by members of the German army.

The Spartacus League was born at the beginning of IWW, in August 1914, as an international group. It was made up of German socialists and Marxists who have refused the conflict and who, at the end of the war, will merge in the foundation of the German communist party: the KPD was born in December 1918 with a program that makes use of the one written a few weeks before by Rosa Luxemburg for the Spartacus League (*Was will der Spartakusbund?*).

The League is a pacifist group that names itself after a warrior (precisely Spartacus in 1916 in conjunction with the publication of its own magazine: *Spartacus Briefe*, only later, in 1917, on the advice of Karl Liebknecht, it becomes the Spartacus League); the name of those who challenge power fully aware that any insubordination involves a violent break. The League takes its name from the rebel slave, Spartacus, who in 73 BC, dared to challenge the power of Rome. History, myth, violence, strategies, struggle bring into play the name of a leader capable of inventing class conflict by leading a group of dispossessed. Spartacus, slave of the Roman Republic, frees himself from the yoke requiring him to take part in the gladiator show. He rises up but he is not alone. He becomes the tread of a mass of rebels – mostly slaves

and deserters – who, before being defeated, makes life difficult for many legions of the Republic by demonstrating unexpected strategic and military capabilities and by developing forms of sophisticated guerrilla warfare.

We consider Spartacus, the Roman ex-slave, a powerful conceptual figure in the sense that Gilles Deleuze gives to this notion. When a proper name de-subjectifies and enters a web of relationships (historical, political, mythical) around which a vector capable of condensing the power of a gesture, the reason for a life, coagulates. A conceptual figure that even beyond its historical substance, is able to conceive politics as an escape, a process of radical dissemination, a form of rejection. There, the possibility of living otherwise from how people who have nothing live normally emerges concretely.

Thinking of Spartacus as a conceptual figure requires a reconsideration of the relationship between revolt and collective violence of destituent gestures. In other words, it highlights how the political dimension of any destitute intention is given exclusively if it is able to establish alliances, breaking the mere, albeit very important, individual testimony against the villainy of power.

The ability of the rebels led by Spartacus to set up a revolt lasting over time (from 73 to 71 BC), by organizing on the slopes of Vesuvius, a form of community able to withstand the onslaught of troops from Rome, widening, thanks to its victories, the number of slaves who joined the rioters, survives through history. It is a vortex that grows over the centuries, increasing its mass because it becomes a point of reference for those who dare the “unpredictable”. This happens when, after having endured everything, the poorest people of the earth suddenly stop tolerating the intolerable.

At a closer look, this story probably reveals, in an exemplary way, the importance of memory for politics according to the idea that emerges in the encounter (almost a missed one) between Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. A fundamental revolutionary task is also to arouse the unexpressed possibilities of the past, i.e. to invent a tradition of the oppressed so that the defeats of the poorest are not in vain; rather, they must fuel the urgency of any insurrection.

A group of pacifists, socialists, and communists had to think of the entire issue quite similarly. That is the reason why in 1914 they gave birth to the Spartacus League. They bear the name of an ex-rebel slave because they do not miss out the political relevance of memory for those who struggle here and now. By choosing this name, they remind us that not only it was possible to think the impossible but that it was also possible to give a political form to it by inventing a no-border community, having a mobile identity and non-existent borders.

Can the revolt, the insurrection of those who own nothing but their lives, embody a gesture of radical retraction from the logic of power? Breaking the banks and trying the impossible, experimenting with the unthinkable, even with a group of dispossessed, putting the garrisons of the most powerful army ever

seen before and starting a new life on the edge of a volcano, is the echo. of any form of radical political rejection/recoil?

For us, Spartacus is the name of the indecipherable political charge of political memory; of an idea of politics that has the task of daring the impossible; to break the institutional monumentalization of memory, a crystallization meant to paralyze the past in the past. Rather, the repetition of the name of Spartacus evokes a time when any form of desolation ends.

When the Spartacus League was born in Germany in 1914, one thing was immediately clear to the German socialists and communists: the war annihilated the idea that revolution was the result of a linear progress; violent, very hard, but fatal and inscribed within the form of a historical continuity. The Great War destroys this illusion. On the contrary, after the tragedy of the first world war, the proletarian revolution, without hiding the catastrophe, imposes a leap, a fracture, a fold of history: it requires another time in time. It requires the emergence of a revolutionary subjectivity that is not only part of the workers' movement, but which finds its lymph even among those who are not part of it, the excluded, the last, those without a part. In short, like the rebel commander who dared to face Rome, those who arise are foreigners in their homeland: slaves, proletarians, those who, by the mere fact of living, embody a radical alterity in relation to those who have everything. The Spartacist uprising shows that one can live differently from the way power expects us to do: perpetually immersed, as happened to Spartacus before rebelling, in the society of entertainment.

The defeat of the 1919 Berlin revolt is the index of what a political failure is. But this failure, as Walter Benjamin probably understands better than anyone else, must be inscribed in a temporality of politics in which to evoke the memory of the oppressed, their anger. If it is possible to think of a memory of the oppressed, of their defeats, this image coincides with the idea that the past has never passed once and for all. Fragments, images, ruins of the past resist, as Pasolini thought, that can be evoked by the present - mostly through the composition of images. They employ the keeping of the struggle. For this reason, Spartacus remains in history also as an extraordinary subject of aesthetic inventions: plastic, literary, cinematographic (of course, above all, the 1960 Kubrick creation). However, in order for this to happen, it is necessary through struggling, to access another time in time, a time where the normal unfolding of time undergoes obstacles, tears and obstructions. To this extent, the Spartacist uprising is a form of (revolutionary) repetition: the evocation of what survives in history, despite history, but which exhibits, in repetition, invariably something that did not exist in history before. In 1940 *Theses on History*, Benjamin sums up all this with the idea of the *Jetzt-zeit*; another way of understanding the revolutionary time which is the result of a montage, of fractures, events and revolts. A moment in which the memory of the past and the urgency of the present converge.

Any revolt waits for the time when its defeat is gathered by a future generation able to recall the struggles of the past and to organize a new challenge to power.

Spartacus, the ex-slave, moves around, invents ways of escaping. He fights, he struggles, he explores territories. He unites slaves like him, deserters, outcasts, and rejects any stability. As if with his revolt, he assumed the task of piercing the time of power, the task of letting another dimension of time and space emerge. A time where the poor, the unfortunate, the defeated can live and imagine to be free. Spartacus is not an archetype, the embodiment of a transcendental. Rather, he teaches us that the revolution is unfailingly played on the threshold between life and death; it is invariably consumed in the ability, singular and plural, to take its leave of those who force us to be what we are.

To this extent, Spartacus embodies the emblematic figure of a mode of political action placed at the intersection of mythical and historical time, where festive destruction and a yearning for redemption are inseparably united.