

context to the encounter with Anders's thought and especially usefully hints at why it remains so relatively unknown. To this extent Müller acts as a first-rate editor. But the role changes rather in his second order of contributions. Here, Anders is connected in an extremely useful way to contemporary debates about transhumanism, Kracauer's discussion of the Weimar salaried masses, and the significance of smart phones and the like, to develop an argument about how there is presently a condition of 'joyful surrender to painful obsolescence'. Müller has made it possible to think with Anders and, furthermore, provides an excellent introduction to some of the avenues such thinking might follow.

This is a very important book, and hopefully it will lead to a higher profile for Anders's provocative and essential thought. We owe Christopher Müller a debt of intellectual gratitude.

Gianni Vattimo
A Farewell to Truth
(Columbia University Press, 2014)

Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala
Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx
(Columbia University Press, 2014)

Reviewed by: Sid Simpson, *University of Notre Dame, USA*
DOI: 10.1177/0725513618802372

A Farewell to Truth and *Hermeneutic Communism* begin from the same insight: that belief in objective metaphysical truths is no longer tenable after Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the poststructuralist work done in the 60's and 70's. The two books diverge, however, in the context in which they discuss the ramifications. Presenting an interpretive model of ethics which takes as its starting place the finitude of our lives, *A Farewell to Truth* seeks to re-envision both religion and ethics after the death of objective truth. *Hermeneutic Communism*, on the other hand, articulates the effect of the loss of objective truth on modern neoliberal states and their markets, and goes on to offer a way to incorporate, twist and weaken these institutions in the form of a 'spectral' communism.

A Farewell to Truth begins by referencing Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* to point out that Plato, Hegel, and Marx (i.e. the 'enemies') rely on an objective conception of truth: be it the truth of the Forms, of history, or of the revolution. Because what makes each of these thinkers hostile to the open society is their reliance on an eternal truth, Vattimo argues that truth itself is the 'enemy of the open society, and specifically of any democratic politics' (*FT*, p. 2). The ramifications of Popper's work, however, have yet to be fully realized; Vattimo cites the American invasion of Iraq in the name of democracy as a contradiction for a state that has supposedly adopted the

principles of the 'open society' yet feels the urge to recreate the world in its own image. Vattimo proposes that we complete the break with metaphysical objectivity and reformulate the relationship between politics and truth. This, in his eyes, creates 'the basis for a radical new vision of democracy itself' (*FT*, p. 3).

Vattimo points to the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger, rather than the Platonic tradition, as fertile conceptual ground for theorizing about the end of truth. Nietzsche's observation that after the death of God 'there are no facts, only interpretations', as well as Heidegger's articulation of our inseparability from the horizon of meaning in which we find ourselves, compounded by the collapse of real socialism in the 20th century, sets the stage for Vattimo's own 'ontology of actuality'. It holds a 'twofold significance': namely, 'making oneself aware of the paradigm into which one has been thrown yet suspending its claim to definitive validity and heeding Being as that which remains unsaid' (*FT*, p. 32).

Preempting the critique that such an ontology results in a slippery slope into relativism (and worse, domination), Vattimo explains that democracy is indeed only possible once belief in objective truth is jettisoned. A political system which continues to entertain the existence of objective truth 'paves the way to the republic of the philosophers, the experts, the technicians, and – at the limit – the ethical state, which claims to be able to decide what the true good of the citizens is even in defiance of their own opinions and preferences' (*FT*, p. 9). An ontology of actuality, by contrast, makes possible a politics based on the 'construction of consensus and civic friendship'. In this way, bidding truth 'farewell' is not an event to be feared but instead presents the possibility of politics in a world in which metaphysical foundations can no longer be relied upon.

While *A Farewell to Truth* mentions the relationship between political domination and objective truth only in passing, *Hermeneutic Communism* elaborates precisely on this relationship in terms of the modern neoliberal West. Vattimo and Zabala begin by illuminating the connections between power and a 'politics of description', a metaphysically framed system which intends to direct society according to 'the truth'. This 'truth', however, is simply an interpretation, or Kuhnian 'existing paradigm', marshalled by the 'strong against the weak'. Because of this, Vattimo and Zabala draw a clear connection between truth and violence, and even go so far as to call violence the political meaning of truth. For this reason, the authors reverse the usual relationship between metaphysics and dominion, saying instead that 'Metaphysics is an aspect and a consequence of dominion, not its cause' (*HC*, p. 12). Those under the dominion of a politics of description, made possible by a parallel return to conservative philosophical realism, exist in what Derrida called the 'margins of philosophy' or, as Benjamin would put it, within 'the tradition of the oppressed' (*HC*, p. 16). For Vattimo and Zabala, 'the end of truth is the beginning of democracy', or in other words, release from dominion is coextensive with release from the objectivity of metaphysical truth.

In order to demonstrate their point, the authors underscore the status-quo maintaining, and thereby emergency-undermining, nature of American politics. Using the 2003 Iraq invasion as an example, Vattimo and Zabala remind the reader that the supposed existence of weapons of mass destruction was ultimately immaterial; the moment the weapons were shown not to exist, the US's noble visions of democracy were sufficient

reasons for the invasion. The example demonstrates not only American foreign policy's conservative self-regulation, but also the unsubstantiated urge to impose liberal institutions and political systems on other states which results in the 'exclusion of the invaded state's cultural and political systems' (*HC*, p. 57). Thus, the US's self-certainty is enough to turn the prior inhabitants of those states into the 'weak', or the oppressed at the margins of history.

Vattimo and Zabala extend their analysis to US financial policy, looking closely at the 2008 financial crisis as well as the IMF's imposition of structural adjustment criteria on developing countries. Citing Paul Krugman, the authors point to the metaphysical seduction of capitalism, which takes the form of the boon which would follow from a 'perfect, frictionless market'. Unfortunately, there are both particularistic and broader reasons that US bankers turned a blind eye to the self-undermining illusion of the free market: the prospect of a powerful job within framed democracy, and the 'submission of their discipline to the "secure path of science", where alternatives, changes, or shocks are impossible, given that "modern financial economics [has] everything under control"' (*HC*, p. 60). Vattimo and Zabala, then, are in agreement with economist Joseph Stiglitz when he claims that 'the recession is not a crisis of the housing bubble but rather of our whole economic and political system' (*HC*, p. 61).

Having detailed the 'myth' of objective truth and how it animates America's expansionism and foreign policy, *A Farewell to Truth* and *Hermeneutic Communism* offer ways forward. For Vattimo and Zabala, embracing the end of objective truth opens the door to emancipatory re-imaginings of religion, ethics, and politics. *A Farewell to Truth* presents a radical reinterpretation of Christianity in the light of Vattimo's 'ontology of actuality'. Flowing neatly from his rejection of objective dogmatism in the face of a perspectival modernity, Vattimo points to the (Christian) Church's persisting impulse to be a ground of eternal truth. The 'biblical anthropology' held by the Church is the reason they 'fight so hard against divorce, abortion, and homosexual unions and why genetic engineering, even for therapeutic ends, horrifies them so much' (*FT*, p. 50). This rigid insistence on the literal truth of the Bible, however, puts the Church squarely in tension with a modernity that rejects foundational thinking on a large scale.

In another homage to Heidegger, Vattimo explains that only a *relativistic* God can save us now. This 'weak' God accepts 'that the age of the Bible as a deposit of knowledge, the truth of which is guaranteed by divine authority, is over and gone' and that this process is a 'part of salvation history' (*FT*, p. 53). For the same reasons that Vattimo believes objective truth leads to domination in the political arena, he urges the Church to vacate objective claims on the grounds that such a stance would be an 'authoritarian abuse' which 'scandalizes the faithful' (*FT*, p. 62). Why, then, should we turn to a religion rid of metaphysics rather than jettison religion completely? Beyond the fact that Christian theology thoroughly permeates the Western tradition, Vattimo contends that Christianity contains 'the latent powers to liberate' through an ethic of *caritas*, or charity, which entails 'the progressive elimination of walls – the Berlin Wall, the wall of natural laws that they preach against the freedom of individuals, the wall of the laws of the market' (*FT*, p. 79).

If religion can be reimagined after the departure of objective truth, Vattimo argues that ethics can as well. Using Heidegger's concept of *Verwindung* (translated as

overcoming), Vattimo proposes an 'ethics of finiteness' which transcends metaphysical, and thereby violent, 'groundings' in favor of using 'as its explicit point of departure (not its foundation or ground) the condition of ungroundedness in which it now finds itself thrown'. Situated within our own temporal horizon, an ethics of finiteness would be informed by cultural inheritances which we might still hold to be true, but not for their status as objective, natural, or essential. Such an ethics would flow from reason that self-consciously reconstructs itself, thereby freeing it from the violence of ultimate or first principles. In this way, Vattimo's ethical project seeks to achieve 'the exclusion of the violence that sees itself as legitimate and the end of any violent authoritarian silencing of any interlocutor's questing in the name of first principles' (*FT*, p. 99).

His worry, however, is that the conditions for change are impeded by the illusory capabilities of dialogue, which ultimately retrench the status quo. Citing Walter Benjamin, Vattimo hopes that a disruptive conflict could open up the possibility of dialogue, especially 'to give a voice to those who didn't have one before' (*FT*, p. 119). These voiceless entities are crucial for Vattimo because 'they have found the strength to resist American Imperialism' and by virtue of that remain places of political innovation vis-à-vis a developed world in which metaphysics has come to an end (*FT*, p. 124).

Religion and ethics, then, can be understood anew after the end of metaphysics. In *Hermeneutic Communism*, Vattimo and Zabala follow up their discussion of metaphysically-framed Western capitalistic states by exploring the possibilities of interpretation and hermeneutics for communism. Vattimo and Zabala explain that interpretation is inherently political given its potential to emancipate the historically oppressed from the bearers of power. The authors bring our attention to what they call hermeneutic 'alterations', which add new vitality to meaning through interpretation. They point to three historical examples of the power of hermeneutic interpretation: Martin Luther, whose translation of the Bible brought about 'a revolutionary political operation'; Sigmund Freud, whose analysis of the self in terms of internal drives transgressed the rational/irrational and normal/abnormal dualities; and Thomas Kuhn, whose theory of scientific paradigm shift was a revolt against the dominion of logical empiricism.

Vattimo and Zabala declare their hermeneutics to be 'modernity's proper philosophy' (*HC*, p. 90). Taking seriously the destruction of metaphysics that these insights inaugurate, the authors articulate hermeneutics as 'a way of looking at Being as an inheritance that is never considered as ultimate data' (*HC*, p. 93). When situated in terms of the oppressed of history, hermeneutics comprise what Vattimo has called before 'weak thought', which 'becomes a (strong) theory of weakening as an interpretive sense of history, a sense that reveals itself as emancipative because of the enemies it has attracted' (*HC*, p. 96). Using Rorty, Schürmann, and Lyotard to articulate hermeneutic weak thought as 'an ethics without principles and a politics without truth', the authors envision a mode of interpretation free from the self-affirming metaphysical tendencies enshrined in the neoliberal politics of the West.

At this point, the intersection of hermeneutical weak thought and communism is made clear. Playing off the first line of the *Communist Manifesto*, the authors explain that communism today is still 'spectral' because it no longer is perceived as a threat to the status quo in light of the domination of capitalistic framed countries. Seeking to

transcend the violent connotations that continue to plague communism, Vattimo and Zabala explain that hermeneutic communism does not hold a fatalistic, and potentially despotic, utopia in view, but instead regards 'a society without classes, capable of living in peace' as a regulative ideal. Seeking to pave a way between revolution and reformism, the authors examine social movements occurring in South America.

Looking first to Chávez in Venezuela, Vattimo and Zabala explain that neoliberal framing of Chávez as a dictator overlooks his democratic election in 1998, 2000, 2004, 2006, and 2009, as well as the positive effect of his 'Bolivarian Revolution', namely that 'extreme poverty has been reduced by 72 percent since 2003, infant mortality has dropped by more than one third, and Venezuela has now become a territory free of illiteracy' (*HC*, p. 125). The authors also look to Evo Morales in Bolivia, explaining that his decision to withdraw from the IMF and World Bank and to radically nationalize the country's resources has been a bulwark against 'exploitation by foreign corporations'. These efforts, among others occurring in South America, allowed UNASUR a sphere of autonomy unsullied by the United States. This, according to Vattimo and Zabala, is why 'weak communism is the political alternative to the neoliberal impositions of framed democracies' (*HC*, p. 128).

It is certainly worth mentioning that Venezuela's recent and ongoing economic collapse under the Maduro presidency poses a difficulty for Vattimo and Zabala. While they are right to emphasize the positive effects of the 'Bolivarian Revolution', they had yet to see what would happen when the price of oil dropped significantly in 2014. In light of hyperinflation and the seemingly authoritarian capture of power by Maduro, more blame is being ascribed to *Chavismo*, and the fact that these social programs, although beneficial when working, were entirely dependent on the price of oil. In this case, it is unclear whether or not Vattimo and Zabala would take from Chávez the elements they found most appealing, or find within his political project more worrisome challenges for their own project.

The book concludes by confronting the question of whether or not a figure like Chávez (or at least the Chávez the authors describe) could serve as a role model for the president of the US. The authors explain that looking to countries like China or India is insufficient given their assimilation into the neoliberal order, and that 'South American socialism appears to be the realm in which a possible alternative to the dominant capitalist vision of the world can take place' (*HC*, p. 135). Though the authors appear less than enthusiastic about the prospects of US officials taking up 'weak thought', they remind the reader that the modern task of philosophy is to intensify 'the consciousness of conflict, even though everything . . . seems to prove it wrong' (*HC*, p. 139).

Taken together, *A Farewell to Truth* and *Hermeneutic Communism* give an account of why objective truth is no longer tenable in modernity, how our modern political and religious institutions still rely on metaphysical groundings, and how we might use a distinctly post-metaphysical ontology of actuality to transcend the violence inherent in our current world. *A Farewell to Truth* offers a compelling way forward: namely embracing an active (or value-creating) nihilism and constructing an ethics based on charity and our finitude. Of particular interest is Vattimo's postmodern conception of Christianity. Whereas much late modern and contemporary thought has dismissed Christianity and religion more broadly as the apex of myth which will sink along with

metaphysics itself, Vattimo's acute awareness of Christianity's inextricability with the Western tradition allows him to formulate a philosophical project that responds to the crisis of metaphysics without forgetting the history that led there.

A Farewell to Truth is necessarily schematic. Nonetheless, readers may wonder how Vattimo sees the end of metaphysics culminating practically in an ethics of finitude rather than the relativistic metaphysics he dispatches. Moreover, though Vattimo forcefully and repeatedly claims that metaphysical grounds are no longer tenable or believable, one may point to the persistence of widespread belief in such grounds (whether they be theological, economic, etc.). Another discussion alluded to but ultimately left unexamined is how the metaphysical belief in the truth of science or the market will be overcome or surpassed. Nietzsche and Heidegger, two authors Vattimo cites extensively in this book, both saw the objectivity of metaphysics enshrined in these areas after the death of God. While Vattimo gives his readers a fascinating insight into postmodern Christianity, how might science or economics look freed from the violence of their supposedly objective truths?

Extending the analysis into the political realm, *Hermeneutic Communism* represents a laudable effort to reimagine communism given the destruction of metaphysics and use South America to exemplify this new form of resistance. Though similarly schematic given its brevity, Vattimo and Zabala argue persuasively that the neoliberal logics manifest in US foreign and monetary policies retrench themselves in the face of crises, and that this conservative self-regulation is firmly wed to the belief that neoliberal institutions are 'correct' (a belief that such institutions exude in the first place).

Given the last section of the book, the reader is left wondering whether or not the socialistic weak thought occurring in South America can sustain itself against the hegemonic might of the US. While the authors leave the question somewhat open, a reader might be concerned that because the examples of socialism exemplified in Venezuela and Bolivia were made possible given their traditions and historical relationship with the US and Europe, the weak thought celebrated by Vattimo and Zabala will not leave the borders of South America.

Even in light of these questions, *A Farewell to Truth* and *Hermeneutic Communism* will be of interest to a variety of readers. *A Farewell to Truth* serves the important role of providing a postmodern account of ethics that, through its attention to our historical aperture, goes beyond neo-pragmatism. This historical view, which makes clear his attention to Christian *caritas*, makes Vattimo's book relevant to those interested in late modern, contemporary, and especially post-modern thought. *Hermeneutic Communism* is a well-written attempt to discuss communism in light of the loss of objective truth, and in terms of powers like South America over against the hegemonic US. It will be of great interest to those interested in contemporary conversations regarding communism and capitalism, the tradition and end of metaphysics, and the way in which the American political system retrenches and strengthens itself.
