

In Defence of Headless Acts

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Some advertising slogans are so appropriate for their time that one can almost say of them what Hegel said about philosophy: that they apprehend their time in concepts. It takes a particularly keen eye, perhaps combined with coincidence or luck, to discover or coin the kind of statement that suddenly expresses what we were all thinking without being quite aware of it.

Nike's "Just Do It" from 1988 is regarded by many as the most effective advertising slogan ever coined. It is a motivational speech in three words to inspire us and push us forward at the exact moment when we hesitate or lack the necessary drive, no matter what the particular struggle: Someone attempting a bench press at the next weight level, or a marathon runner in need of that crucial flash of motivation to break through the "wall" of exhaustion ("Just Do It"); but also the dustman who has to get up long before dawn ("Just Do It"); the graduate student who struggles to finish her thesis ("Just Do It"); the person in love, holding back for fear of rejection ("Just Do It"); etc. etc. However, this great versatility also demonstrates a more sinister aspect of the slogan – what we might call the postmodern superego: You have all options available, you can do anything you want, but you have to come up with it yourself, spontaneously. You have to get involved, show initiative and enthusiasm, and get things done. All the time. More and more. But you can never quite do enough; you must constantly act, and be grateful that you can.

There is something paradoxical about our time. On the one hand, it is characterised by the imperative to act in an excessive manner that is harmful, personally as well as politically. On the other hand, it is quite clear that action is required more than ever, perhaps even quite radical action to shift the very coordinates of the problems we face: from global warming, the increasing flow of refugees, new forms of inequality, etc. etc. The task is therefore not so much one of arguing for or against action, but rather one of understanding what kind of action is required.

Three types of act

In our new book *Hand! (Act!)*, we argue that one can meaningfully speak of three quite distinct types of act. We need to distinguish between various types of act in order to explain how there can be simultaneously too little and too much action. Too much acting is going on in the sense that something constantly needs doing; everybody has to be adaptable and flexible and be upbeat and “go for it”. The first type of act we focus on is thus a kind of compulsory act, i.e. things that we feel we have to do, even though we are not quite sure why – and perhaps we even feel pressured or stressed out by the compulsion.

The counter-reaction to such a stressful life is that we insist on living unplugged, cooking with our children, reading quality novels, etc. Or even simply sitting at the beach, throwing stones in the sea. This reaction insists upon the meaningful life, on authenticity and autonomy, and on the sanctuaries we can carve out in our busy lives if we refuse to follow the constant demands for activity screaming at us from ads, colleagues, media. This is the second type of act.

The third type, however, which we find most important for our time, and worth reinventing, is the kind of act that does not simply seek to meet the requirements of the age, nor does it work against them by creating free spaces, sanctuaries, and individual options within the same hectic reality. Instead, this type of act changes the very coordinates of the reality we live in. We call this type of act a “true act”.

True acts

For a number of years, true acts have been banished. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, liberal pundits and philosophers announced that the end of history had arrived. Western democracy and market forces had prevailed, and it was now merely a matter of waiting for the rest of the world to follow suit. No more great “ideological” struggles, and no more experimenting with new political projects. However, this end of history gave rise to what the Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič has described as a *crisis of sublimation*, one that still haunts us today. We have lost the ability to actually change anything, i.e. our capacity for action, for raising projects and ideas up to the level of the sublime, and at the same time we are frantically active, running around in circles and spending

vast amounts of energy. Our capacity for sublimation has turned into a sort of centrifugal force. We are all expected to run faster every day, perpetually online and accessible, without ever moving from the spot, like a hamster in its wheel. The crucial task now is to reinvent our capacity for sublimation: To find the point from which we can catapult ourselves back out of the hamster wheel. Instead of acting even more compulsively, moving further into the given frame, we should act in an emancipatory manner to change the frame itself.

But how do we do this? It can only be done, we claim, through a particular type of wager. An act that can be characterised as true is always a wager, since it moves outside the guarantees provided by the acknowledgement of others or by doing what is expected. Even though it thus comes without any guarantees and cannot be prescribed based on familiar categories, such an act is simultaneously given by a special, perhaps even higher form of guarantee: This simply *must* be done, whatever the cost.

In our book, we find the resources for understanding this type of act in Søren Kierkegaard, among others. Kierkegaard explores what happened to Abraham when he was seized by God's command to travel to mount Moriah and sacrifice his own son. Although this act is terrifying and almost impossible to understand, it was crucial for Kierkegaard that ultimately, the story is precisely not about a sacrifice – quite the contrary. It is about how Abraham “won Isaac for himself”, and with him the entire subsequent history of his descendants (because as we know, everything ends well thanks to Abraham's unwavering faith.) Kierkegaard's author, Johannes de Silentio, approaches this story in several turns, carefully and from several angles; he shivers at the thought and wishes to understand Abraham's faith, and yet he cannot but express his awe and wonder at it.

Headless acts

If we wish to carry out an act, it becomes necessary at some point to interrupt the rational weighing of arguments for or against. There is of course no guarantee that any particular act, characterised by explosive transgression of the given norms, is an act worth engaging in. One may indeed go terribly wrong when giving in to some sudden idea or thought or sense of obligation. In a sense, how-

ever, our point is the opposite: *Without* this dimension of a drive, a leap, or a decision, the dimension Kierkegaard and others have argued for, nothing truly valuable will ever happen. It is simply a necessary condition if life is to contain surprise and renewal, and if we are to fundamentally take part in establishing our own existence.

The paradox is that in order to become more genuinely present in our own lives, we must actually allow ourselves to be carried away by something not originating in our own conscious deliberations or wishes. In an essential sense, an act is something that happens to us. It is *duty, fundamental being, the Other, the voice, the unconscious, or drive* that acts – it is something in us that is not ourselves, and yet it is only through this agency that we can truly become ourselves.

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan spoke of a "headless subjectivation" or a "subjectivation with no subject". Perhaps we can understand this in the sense that an act originates in the unrest we often feel – a sense that things are not quite as they should be – and that in the act, we *become one*, so to speak, with this very distance from the normal order of things. What happens is not necessarily that we contrive a detailed plan for the entire scheme, but our very resistance to business as usual may suddenly latch on to one particular point that we then refuse to let go of. As when, for instance, a crowd refuses to go home, remaining out in the square until the dictator resigns. Or when a group of artists stake everything on some impossible project. Or when a scientist pursues a new idea that breaks with all the known regularities. In psychoanalysis, the name for this is *drive*. Drive precisely expresses the notion that a shift may occur inside us, a shift that cannot be undone or ignored: This, and only this, is the right thing to do. Following the drive may lead to self-destruction and ruthlessness, but it can also, paradoxically, lead to a brand new sense of freedom and autonomy.

Horizons for action

Even though the call to "reinvent the radical act" may seem abstract and risky, we could also shift our perspective and say that it is not that difficult to find areas where acts are required – not only acts that make sense and improve our quality of life etc., but ones that directly challenge the framework of the life we live right now.

If we fail to do something quite serious, very soon, something that truly mobilises all our creative, inventive, and disciplined resources, climate change will have immense consequences for all of humankind. The vast and persistent inequality produced by finance capital and neoliberal globalisation, concentrating economic and political power in the hands of very few people, calls for new communities, movements, and parties willing to seize power and risk new models of financial policy, banking, division of labour, etc. Right-wing populism must be dealt with firmly, but also confronted with new ideas for coexistence, peace-making, de-escalation of conflict, understanding cultural and ethnic difference, new forms of universalism and solidarity, etc. The crisis of our educational systems and the increasing anti-intellectualism must be countered by new (or reinterpretations of old) ideas about learning; perhaps even by new institutions outside the traditional ones: schools for popular education, academies, debating societies, street parliaments and universities, etc. The new surveillance society with its combination of state power and the capitalisation of private and intimate information and images must be met with proactive counterstrategies that approach questions of intellectual property rights, privacy, shame, sharing, oppositional communication, etc. in entirely new ways.

It is not hard to find issues that call for action. Perhaps the more difficult thing is to actually believe that we can act.