Tiny Drops: Henri de Lubac, S.J., Dorothy Day, & Anti-Triumphalism as Radical Praxis

Jack Downey

The people have asked, so what are the demands? What are the demands all of these people are making? Either they say there are no demands and that leaves your critics confused, or they say that the demands for social equality and economic justice are impossible demands. And the possible demands, they say, are just not practical. If hope is an impossible demand, then we demand the impossible…

Judith Butler¹

WE REPEAT—

The only immediate remedy is the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. When asked what is the program of THE CATHOLIC WORKER by those who are interested in political action, legislation, lobbying, class war, we reply—It is the program set forth by Christ in the Gospels. The Catholic Manifesto is The Sermon on the Mount. And when we bring THE CATHOLIC WORKER into the streets and public squares, and when we picket the Mexican consulate, it is to practice the spiritual works of mercy—to instruct the ignorant and to comfort the afflicted.

Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. There is no use looking for a revival in business, a return of prosperity, until the hearts and minds of men be changed. If we wish for a program, let us look into our own hearts. The beginning is there.

Dorothy Day²

¹ Transcript and video are available at: http://www.salon.com/2011/10/24/judith_butler_at_occupy_wall_street/.
On October 23, 2011, Judith Butler joined the ranks of public intellectuals to come out in support of Occupy Wall Street – an ensemble that has included Slavoj Žižek and Cornel West, not to mention the next-gen radical anthropologist David Graeber, who was an early participant in the New York occupation.¹ Butler’s articulation of principles during a General Assembly at Washington Square Park spoke to an internal tension within activist rhetoric that predates the recent groundswell of popular anti-capitalism. Whether ostensibly critical or sympathetic, the interpretive framework for engaging radical organizing appears bifurcated and based on a false dichotomy of activist stereotypes that have even become hot commodities in the marketing world now that protest is fashionable again – as comically exemplified by Axe Body Spray’s ludicrous marketing campaign to peddle its new scent, “Anarchy.”² Whether dismissively depicting the protestors as quasi-eschatological millennial idealists (even the atheists) or bewildered, angst-ridden Holden Caulfield impostors who compulsively rally against something without contributing anything constructively to society, both renderings infantilize their subjects, because they are both escapist, and ignore the murky realities of day-to-day necessity and the work involved in building and maintaining a homeostatic social order.

These stereotypes – which mask any real diversity of thought – further marginalize radicalism, leaving the impression that temperate progressivism and nominal incremental change are the only viable options on the market for mature, socially conscious liberals. Both now-discredited tendencies are based on short-term sentimentality, and need to be endured, but not seriously addressed, because they do not provide enduring solutions. Having thus dispatched radical approaches to structural inequality, we are left with the only really “responsible” alternative – moderate reform. Incremental change is more tactful and diplomatic, therefore superior; less romantic, but more practical. In fact, it is the only practical option, and therefore the only truly moral option, because it is results-oriented, and relies less on enthusiastic rhetoric and quixotic militant hyperbole. It is less sexy, but more substantial. It doesn’t inspire Axe Body Spray, but it gets the job done. It also largely maintains and reinforces the very structures that precipitate inequality, while holding out hope that, this time around, things will just work out better. It maintains hierarchy, crossing its fingers for a more benevolent, benign incarnation which requires minimal sacrifice from those in power, and in turn promises minimal returns for at-risk communities.

Along with actually radicalizing, or at least galvanizing, a previously amorphous American progressive base, the Occupy movement – as part of the widespread international trend of widely-reported protests over the past two or three years – seems to have magically spawned a cottage industry of censors who point out the movement’s lack of focus, cohesive vision of the world, concrete goals, and inability to provide a comprehensive game plan for an alternate political framework.³ Whether it be the openly spiteful get-a-job-hippie antagonism of people like one-time-GOP-nominee-hopeful Herman Cain or the patronizing, unsolicited advice of remote armchair activist “fellow travelers” – David Brooks’ saccharine New York Times op-ed column entitled “How to Fight the Man” comes to mind – it seems like, almost overnight, we have witnessed a proliferation of spontaneously self-credentialed movement strategists.⁴ In October, the Vatican even tossed its hat in the ring, publishing a critique of the “economic and financial crisis gripping the world today.”⁵

One alternative to utopianism that avoids post-millennial apocalyptic “pessimism,” apathy, or the disenchanted pragmatism of compromise and dog-eat-dog moral casualty may be found in the tradition of Christian personalism; one that does not capitulate to alpha-posturing and self-preservation, or a permissive ethical minimalism that seeks out the bare minimum required to avoid sin, while enjoying a kind of socio-economic status quo war-profiteering. Catholic Worker personalism – particularly embodied in Dorothy Day (1897-1980) – systematically resisted a product-oriented cost-benefit analysis, or the polar opposite trapings of utopianism and nihilism. Interpreting protest work as itself a spiritual exercise, the Catholic Worker proposed incorporating socio-political agitation into the arsenal of Christian ethical behavior codified as the Works of Mercy. Almost simultaneously, although he could only be appropriated as an “anonymous personalist” – or possibly a proto-personalist, given his symbiotic friendship with Emmanuel Mounier – the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac (1896-1991) laid a historico-theological foundation for Day’s own alternative romanticism by proposing a form of Catholic realism that, while being typically ecclesiastic, is rooted in a vaguely personal supernaturalism.

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² Which is not to say that there are not very legitimate criticisms that have been – and can still be – made. From the Left, issues of race, class, gender dynamics, and indigenous rights have enriched the dialogue and shed some very good, critical light on deficiencies within the movement.⁵


nevertheless tempered the eschatological supercessionism in political theology. This more sober romanticism opened a space for Dorothy Day's own incarnational spirituality – an anarchist take on the "Little Way" of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, rooted in a lifelong commitment to absolute pacifism, communitarian self-care, staunch anti-triumphalism, and compassionate resistance to the coercive authority of "Holy Mother the State" – that "by little and by little we are saved."

In Catholic Worker personalism, a pragmatic focus on tangible objectives and end-game strategy ran up against a more emotive, ateleological, conscience-based impulse. While appealing to something as seemingly amorphous as "hope" was apparently sufficient for a presidential campaign, critics of radical activism – both benevolent and otherwise – often highlight a movement's lack of institutional structure, lack of ideology, and lack of civil diplomacy as indicative of emotional instability and psychological immaturity – mirroring the conventional "liberal" stipulation that impacted communities restrict self-advocacy to traditionally "respectable" means like voting, petitioning, possibly calling a representative, or maybe even starting a 501c3. While possibly less efficient, a praxis-based philosophy – while lacking a coherent ideology or comprehensive alternate system of government – seems a more organic method of engaging social inequality, more conducive to creative proactivity. Such work certainly ought not preclude collectives from participating in direct action, which in itself is not based on the teleological, conscience-a and end-game strategy ran up against a more emotive, ateleological, conscience-based impulse. While appealing to something as seemingly amorphous as "hope" was apparently sufficient for a presidential campaign, critics of radical activism – both benevolent and otherwise – often highlight a movement's lack of institutional structure, lack of ideology, and lack of civil diplomacy as indicative of emotional instability and psychological immaturity – mirroring the conventional "liberal" stipulation that impacted communities restrict self-advocacy to traditionally "respectable" means like voting, petitioning, possibly calling a representative, or maybe even starting a 501c3. While possibly less efficient, a praxis-based philosophy – while lacking a coherent ideology or comprehensive alternate system of government – seems a more organic method of engaging social inequality, more conducive to creative proactivity. Such work certainly ought not preclude collectives from participating in direct action, which in itself is not based on the

Henri de Lubac is possibly best known to history as one of the "nouveaux théologiens" – the pejorative and unintentionally ironic nickname for a diverse and controversial school of Catholic thought in mid-twentieth century Europe that reacted against what it perceived to be the rigid, and in the end, sterile excesses of Neo-Scholasticism, and trailblazed a ressourcement approach to theology that was at least temporarily vindicated in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Its alleged membership reads like a Who's Who of twentieth-century theological pioneers, many of whom directly and indirectly contributed to the development of liberation theology – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, and Hans Küng to name a few – along with some who are now less closely affiliated

8 Dorothy Day, "Inventory – January 1951," The Catholic Worker (January 1951): 1-2; http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/Reprint2.cfm?TextID=195. Henri de Lubac, S.J., At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned His Writings, translated by Anne Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 27. "Catholicisme" [pub. 1958] was assuredly responding to the "mood of the times," Emmanuel Mounier liked to use it as a doctrinal basis for his "personalist and communitarian revolution" (many have since completely forgotten the first of the two adjectives!).
the Kingdom of God on earth... Or, transposed into an entirely secular vision, it would reappear in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century dreams of a future, inner-worldly, social utopia. In both cases Jesus Christ and his historical Church are left behind. They no longer occupy the ultimate position in history, as they did in the early Christian and medieval social consciousness; they represent instead a transitory stage leading to the final age of the Spirit which is still to come.14

Under the various forms it has assumed, I consider Joachimism to be a still-present, and even pressing, danger. I recognize it in the process of secularization, which, betraying the Gospel, transforms the search for the kingdom of God into social utopias. I see it at work in what is justly called the “self-destruction of the Church.” I believe that it can only increase suffering and bring about the degradation of our humanity.15

Von Balthasar succinctly paraphrases de Lubac’s objection:

In the eyes of universal history, must the Church be understood as the next-to-last reality, the work of the second Person of the Trinity, just as creation and the Old Testament were the works of the first Person—a work that will be overtaken by an age of the Spirit, long-awaited, hoped for, and still to come? Or is she, as the one, holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, invested with the Spirit of the Father and the Son, the final and definitive reality, filled with internal potentialities that will unfurl across the ages, embracing them until the end?16

Joachim’s Trinitarian stages of history are ontologically supersessionist, which, for de Lubac, trivializes the preeminent role of the Church, Christ’s eschatological significance, and reduces God to a projection of anthropocentric ego—which was, in fact, the bedrock of Feuerbach’s atheism. Henri de Lubac’s critique of “Joachimism”—which extended to Jürgen Moltmann’s “theology of hope”—was preemptively (and more succinctly) paraphrased in the Social Gospel pioneer of “Joachimism” – which extended to Jürgen Moltmann’s “theology of hope” – which was, in fact, the bedrock of Feuerbach’s atheism. Henri de Lubac’s critique

The “diverse forms” of Joachimism that de Lubac witnessed in contemporary society extend deeply into the secular world, into ideologies that are in no way self-consciously connected to Christianity, and many which are, in fact, explicitly self-identified as atheist. While de Lubac was certainly not opposed to social justice, he did himself participate in the resistance against Nazism in Germany and Vichy France, and has been credited for emphasizing the communal dimension of the Mystical Body. He viewed these forms of “neojoachimism,” along with more traditional permutations, as inherently “suicidal” by undermining the role of the Church, which he viewed as the only proper custodian of the human spirit.18

Although she did occasionally affiliate herself and her spiritual mentors with de Lubac—particularly when it came to mistreatment by the Magisterium and Jesuit authorities—Dorothy Day had little formal overlap with him.19 A convert, journalist, and icon of modern Catholic activism, Dorothy Day co-founded The Catholic Worker zine in 1933 and oversaw a network of communities throughout the United States dedicated to providing hospitality for the poor, radical pacifism, and a critique of free-market capitalism, all inspired by a committed life of prayer. As a lived protest against Christian mediocrity, she testified that “[f]or too long, too little has been expected of us.”20 Day’s emphasis on the Catholic Worker’s apostolate as a non-utilitarian form of Christian witness was founded on her sense of “precarity” – an existential iteration of voluntary poverty. Although the Worker involved itself in the mundane Works of Mercy, feeding and clothing the poor, “admonishing sinners” (which she interpreted as a call to protest social injustice), and comforting the afflicted, Day refused to assess its mission in terms of measurable success. As Day confided to the Worker-turned-Harvard-psychologist Robert Coles:

You people are impractical, they tell us, nice idealists, but not headed anywhere big and important. They are right. We are impractical, as one of us put it, as impractical as Calvary. There is no point in trying to make us into something we are not. We are not another Community Fund group, anxious to help people with some bread and butter and a cup of coffee or tea. We feed the hungry, yes; we try to shelter the homeless and give them clothes, if we have some, but there is a strong faith at work; we pray. If an outsider who comes to visit doesn’t pay attention to our praying and what that means, then he’ll miss the whole point of things.21


Day's absolute refusal to instrumentalize (in her mind dehumanize) others in order to achieve practical ends, as well as her absolute pacifist stance, drew sharp criticism—even within the Worker community—and synced nicely with Day's own vision of engaged supernaturalism and what she glibly called "poverty of reputation." 22

A Brooklyn native by birth, Dorothy Day was raised in San Francisco and Chicago, in a household largely devoid of religion, although the Day children were baptized Episcopalians. In her adolescence, Dorothy Day exhibited an early empathetic receptivity, which was triggered by the devastating San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and her encounter with factory labor conditions—first in the pages of Upton Sinclair's The Jungle, and later walking the streets of Chicago's West Side industrial wasteland. 23 In both of these instances, she experienced a spontaneous and enduring sense of self-identification with the suffering of others. This was bolstered in the former by a recognition of humanity’s innate cooperative impulse, lying beneath the apparently harsh exterior of rugged individualism. And although the Day household did briefly plunge into dire financial straits immediately on arrival before her father secured steady work, Dorothy's experience of urban poverty in Chicago was somewhat voyeuristic. They nevertheless gave slight glimmers of her deep incarnational aesthetics, which were marked by the ability to perceive beauty in the depths of apparent destitution. 24 Although, at the time, she lacked the conceptual tools to articulate her experience of divinity amidst—even fused with—the bleak suffering of humanity’s underclass, Day marked this period as the very beginnings of her radical formation.

After dropping out of the University of Illinois—Urbana at the conclusion of her sophomore year in 1916, Day moved east back to New York City, where she would—with minor excursions afield—spend the remaining eighty-four years of her life. Having gotten involved in labor organizing in Chicago, she developed her craft as a journalist, writing for local Socialist publications and carousing with a mix of radicals and artists, including the perpetually-lubricated poet Eugene O’Neil. 25 Eventually the haze of excitement wore off, and Day’s experience of urban poverty in Chicago was somewhat voyeuristic. They nevertheless gave slight glimmers of her deep incarnational aesthetics, which were marked by the ability to perceive beauty in the depths of apparent destitution. 24 Although, at the time, she lacked the conceptual tools to articulate her experience of divinity amidst—even fused with—the bleak suffering of humanity’s underclass, Day marked this period as the very beginnings of her radical formation.

By the summer of 1931, Day had returned to New York, and moved into an apartment in what became Alphabet City with her daughter Tamar. The United States was thoroughly steeped in the Great Depression, providing Day with ample material for introspective reflection but no easy avenues for change. She grew frustrated with her inability to integrate her religious and political orientations, and her own sense of personal disengagement from social movements of the era. Although she had formally joined the Church, she still had no real community, and felt crippled by loneliness and indirection. 26 That would all permanently change on December 9, 1932, when—seemingly out of the blue—Providence deposited on her doorstep a bedraggled, rapidly aging, idiosyncratic, loquacious little Frenchman named Peter Maurin. 27 Maurin was an immigrant from French peasant stock, a former Christian Brother, who had discerned a clear vocation to evangelize the modern world in these degenerate times. He had developed into an itinerant evangelist, whose preferred medium was his somewhat peculiar "Easy Essays"—pithy little rhymes infused with Catholic social teaching. Maurin appears to have immediately begun indoctrinating Day into his brand of philosophical personalism, fusing anarchism—which Day sometimes preferred to call "communitarianism," which smacked less of the balaclava and Molotov cocktail—with Catholic social teaching and a heroic, maximalist Christian ethic of mutual responsibility that was grounded in the Sermon of the Mount, the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, and the lives of the saints.

Maurin was a "big ideas guy," and soon convinced Day—who miraculously seems to have never wavered from her interpretation of him as a kind of alter Francis of Assisi—that the most efficient way for them to contribute to Catholic renewal among the urban poor was to write about it. It is worth noting that Day had always identified the Catholic Church as the "church of the poor," which was part of its initial pre-conversion appeal. And thus on May Day, 1933, the first edition of The Catholic Worker hit the streets: it was a monthly paper, selling then as now for a penny a copy, discussing pacifism, labor rights, and the pitfalls of free-market capitalism. Eventually their "office"—which was actually Day’s apartment—organically evolved into a flophouse for skid row outpatients and jobless war veterans, along with Peter Maurin himself. The Catholic Worker quite rapidly morphed into a community that provided shelter and food for folks in need, in tandem with its journalism, and advocacy for non-participation civil

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24 Day, The Long Loneliness, 36. "I walked for miles, pushing my brother in his carriage, often with my sister at my side, she usually holding onto the carriage too. We explored until we were footsore, going up and down interminable gray streets, fascinated in their dreary sameness, past tavern after tavern, where I envisaged such scenes as that of the Polish wedding party in Sinclair’s story, past houses which were sunk down a whole story below street level for block after block.

“There were tiny flower gardens and vegetable patches in the yards. Oftentimes there were rows of corn, stunted but still recognizable, a few tomato plants, and always the vegetables were bordered by flowers, often grateful marigolds, all sizes and shades with their pungent odor. I collected odors in my memory, the one beauty in those dreary streets. The odor of geranium leaves, tomato plants, marigolds; the smell of lumen, of tar, of roasting coffee; the smell of good bread and rolls and coffee cake coming from the small German bakeries. Here was enough beauty to satisfy me."

27 Forest, 100-1. Cf. Fisher, 25-6. Actually Maurin had been directed towards Dorothy Day by then Commonweal editor, George Shuster, who thought they might be well-disposed towards one another.
disobedience, particularly on issues of war. At the height of the Depression, the Catholic Worker breadline on the Bowery routinely served a thousand meals a day, operating on virtually no budget outside donations.28

The immediacy of responding to physical and spiritual needs appealed to the Catholic Worker’s personalist sensibilities, and it can be noted that there was no shortage of very practical responsibilities that Day had to juggle throughout her tenure as the de facto “mother superior” of the community. However, the mundane was inextricably linked with the romantic, and Day refused on principle to incorporate the Catholic Worker as a non-profit, or to pay federal taxes, or even to vote, as part of her culture of resistance against “Holy Mother the State.” However, it was her absolute pacifism which cleared out Days’ true spirit of radicalism and uncompromising morals – she was accused of immorality for her hardline position on military intervention during World War II, a position which cost The Catholic Worker many subscriptions, and Day many dear friends. Even within the ranks of her pacifist allies – people such as the celebrity monk Thomas Merton – it was assumed that there was a breaking point to pacifism. However, Day’s more rigorist moral literalism, which mandated voluntary poverty and solidarity with the oppressed, also mandated a willingness to suffer aggression and not trade violence for violence. In all aspects of her activity, Days’ work was permeated by an anti-triumphalist streak that mandated radical social engagement as a spiritual practice rather than a strategy, as a means of bearing witness rather than a tactic, and as a matter of conscience that, while certainly recognizing immediate goals – even if the Catholic Worker sometimes looked like barely organized chaos – resisted the impulse to “use” even their antagonists – and there were plenty of those to go around over the years. As inspiration, Day turned to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a nineteenth-century French Carmelite, who’s “Little Way” transfigured the seemingly mundane minutiae of everyday life into opportunities for cosmic acts of charity.

The prophetic conviction that Day brought into the public arena was an extension of her supernaturalism, and impulse to engage in direct peacemaking on interpersonal and structural levels. Day’s consistent ethic of protest against the dominant secular “pagan mentality,” mixed with her communitarian sensibilities and enthusiastic interior rigorism, formed a comprehensive, proactive philosophy of Catholic radicalism that blended a life of prayer with service work and civil disobedience. The CW’s emphasis on interpreting their diverse tactics through an appropriation and reimagining of the traditional Works of Mercy enabled it to blur conventional distinctions between “service work” and “activism,” as well as between political anarchism, traditional piety, and affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church. In Day’s own maximalist engaged spirituality, voluntary poverty was a precondition for exercising both the corporal and spiritual Works of Mercy, and therefore at the very core of Catholic Worker theology. Day viewed voluntary poverty – in both its literal-economic and existential forms – as
