Two or Three Questions for René Major and Jacques Derrida

Augusto Boal

Ed. note: On 9 June 2001 psychoanalyst René Major and philosopher Jacques Derrida offered public lectures in Rio de Janeiro. Augusto Boal was invited to dialogue with them. Here is the text of his initial intervention as put into English by Boal himself.

A few weeks ago, the Brazilian press published two articles on the same subject, one written by a philosopher, the other by a prostitute. She wrote about Morals of the Prostitute; he wrote about Prostituted Morals.

She revealed, to our astonishment, that the prostitute obeys rigorous moral codes. If, in the morning, she meets one of her clients from the previous night, she pretends she does not see him. Secrecy and loyalty are the foundations of her profession. Lack of punctuality, which in the game of love may be an arm of seduction, is strictly forbidden in prostitution: the prostitute would lose her credibility and her job. That is why she is always on time, like a guerrilla soldier at his dangerous appointments. The prostitute is a moral being.

This must be clear: a prostitute is not a whore.

In his writing, the philosopher, siding with the president [Fernando Henrique Cardoso] who is still in power around here, and who had just bought the votes and the consciences of 20 legislators for the moderate price of 40 million U.S. dollars (bought in gross lots, legislators are not so expensive—a mere two million a head), stated that politics and morals are like water and oil—they never mix. The philosopher affirmed that the politician is a being separate from morals.

Naive as we were, we were inclined to think that a president, elected by the people, should satisfy the desires of those who elected him, those who voted for him believing that he followed their ideas, those who trusted him. However, this was not the case, and the president’s philosopher came to his rescue to explain to us exactly why the president did what he did: Once elected, the president has to satisfy not the desires of those who voted for him, but the needs of the macro-economy, which ordinary citizens ignore because they are worried with the minor aspects of political life, such as black beans.
and rice, a slice of meat, and the price of bread, which belong to the micro-economy, not the macro.

The macro-president, abandoning the people who had given him power; buying legislators and, by doing so, assuming sovereignty over parliament, which is expressly prohibited by our constitution; following the advice of his philosopher friend, for whom oil/politics and morals/water go down the drain together; the president inaugurates a very curious oxymoron, that of Obeying Sovereignty, put forth by the Captains of the Jungle, obedient to globalization and to the Empire, treading the path opened by Mexico, Argentina, and other kneeling countries. Monthly the Brazilian government pays with religious ardor more than one billion dollars to international banks as interest on a debt that has never been examined and never ceases to grow. This amount of money is four times higher than all that the government spends on education, health, culture...and what it should have spent on energy.

We also know that there are two kinds of clowns: those whose laughter makes us laugh; and Buster Keaton, who never smiled. The former beat their heads against doors and stumble in ways that remind us of our own stupidities. From them, we learn what is laughable in our lives. Keaton, on the other hand, was a serious man who makes us laugh because he was incapable of laughing. Keaton is like Don Quixote who still believed in moral values that had long before been dissolved by “historical process.” Keaton and Quixote are anachronistic knights, like us, who still believe in moral values.

We Brazilians want to smile, but who can still smile in a state (Rio) where more than 300 street children were killed last year alone? Who can smile in a city where passengers of 10 to 12 buses are held up every day? Is it possible to smile in a country plunged in darkness as the electricity fails?

We love to love, but we are condemned to hate. We want to stretch big smiles across our faces but we are made into silent and serious Buster Keatons. Reality has sculpted sadness on our stone faces.

If it is true that all human activities, contrary to what the president’s philosopher proclaims, should have the main objective of building a moral system capable of humanizing humanity, I ask myself and I address two or three perplexing questions to René Major and Jacques Derrida: First: Can a Brazilian citizen, incapable of smiling, be analyzed? Can Buster Keaton and Don Quixote lie down on couches? What for? Second: Is all sovereignty cruel because it is sovereignty, or is it cruel only when it is inverted like the sovereignty of our obedient Brazil? Third: If politics is separate from morals, if each politician acquires the right to invent his own customized morality, then true morality, being so fragmented, loses all its solidity and coherence, and is transformed by a vague list of suggestions, some of them very interesting indeed, like Thou Shalt Not Steal, Thou Shalt Not Deceive Thy Voters, Thou Shalt Not in a Cowardly Way Obey the Lords of the Banks and Corporations, etc. Without morals, all interdictions are abolished, including the interdiction against incest, which, from now on, will depend exclusively on sexual appetites, personal criteria, and the opportunities of the moment. If God does not exist, everything is permitted, says Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov. What is the role of the psychoanalyst in a society like ours, where the government obeys only the laws emanating from the International Monetary Fund? Can we place the couch inside the trenches where Brazilian society is hidden? Shall the Brazilian psychoanalyst be a fireman or a pyromaniac?