Responsibility Becomes Us: Responsibility in Cosmopolitan Conditions

The language of responsibility overwhelms and envelopes us. We are, and have been for some time, in what the new US president recently called “an era of responsibility”. But what does this mean? Especially now given the ongoing transformations of the nation state, the new emphasis on cosmopolitan or global citizenship and in light of shifts in strategies of individual and social risk management? Surely we are all responsible, but for what, and more critically, for who?

Levinas, Ricoeur and Arendt, each in their own way, transform the question of responsibility in particular as it relates to subject formation and the possibility or impossibility of political action. My aim is to draw out several points of intersection between the three authors in an attempt to clarify the current conceptual and discursive opacity that surrounds the concepts of individual and collective responsibility especially given fundamental transformations in our understanding of the subject-citizen, and the expansion of the ‘scope’ of responsibility in both space and time under cosmopolitan conditions.

The “question of responsibility” as it has traditionally been articulated (through Kant) rests fundamentally on an understanding of action positing an reflexive author (even state) capable of reasonably understanding the content and limits of its own moral duty and making a choice. But if we start, as Levinas and others do, with the assumption that we are always already responsible –that this responsibility does not depend on “goodwill” as such and is both without limits and without end – then we set aside the issues of origins and good intentions that plague dominant notions of responsibility.

While not without its own dangers, the application of a revised theory of responsibility to cosmopolitan social theory might offer a valuable means by which we can understand the potential of political action (and judgement) anchored in a recognition of a basic existential openness (vulnerability) to others. Furthermore I want to suggest that this basic solidarity – not limited by borders or history – might serve as a critique to a more limited understandings of solidarity based primarily on shared risk (Beck), or worse, on mere bodily exposure to sovereignty (Agamben).