POLITICS AND FATHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FILM "ONE BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER"

by

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The 2025 film written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson "One Battle After Another" has released high levels of excitement and a wide-ranging discussion about the meanings of the movie. The film generates energy and propulsion through its narrative ark, its wonderful cinematography, and its character portraits, despite their ambiguity. It has been awarded six Academy Awards, including ones for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Male Supporting role, Best Casting, Best Editing, and Best Adapted Screenplay. It tells two overlapping stories, one a car-chase action thriller and the other a character driven study of the father- daughter relationship. It is a political satire. It has dark and serious overtones beneath the humor. It is also highly entertaining and compelling because of the expert direction and the depiction of personality. In my opinion, the two narrative lines are not successfully integrated, although Anderson has been writing the film for over twenty years, attempting to adapt the Thomas Pynchon novel, *Vineland*, for the screen. I would have preferred a shorter movie, with fewer car chases and more character development, including less lack of clarity about certain plot points and character portraits.

Set in contemporary America without making direct reference to MAGA or the repressive actions of ICE, with no mention of the tactics of Antifa, the film thematizes the clash of opposing revolutionary factions in the context of governmental, military, and right-wing crackdowns and severe repression. In simplest terms, it pits the extreme revolutionary left against the counter-revolutionary right, a revolutionary left with echoes from the 1960's and early 1970's Weathermen underground, with a dash of the Symbionese Liberation Army thrown in. These violent revolutionaries are opposed by the white supremacist, privileged, ultra wealthy cabal of industrialists, bankers, and military individuals devoted to rounding up and crushing dissident people of color and violent revolutionaries. Both the extreme left, called French 75, and the right, humorously named The Christmas Adventurer's Club, are caricatured, depicted as simplistic versions of violent and extremist political ideology on both sides of the political spectrum. One is the infantile left, trying to come to terms with failed attempts at violent revolution, spewing out dogma and rhetoricially incendiary

slogans, advancing a reductionist version of Fanon's advocacy of revolutionary violence expressed in his last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. For these revolutionaries, militant armed combat is fun, an expression of deeply felt resentments against the oppressive system, and an expression of violent rage against corporate capitalism and its disciplinary apparatus. There is little or no theory in their outlook, no critical analysis, and no indication of the earlier roots or motivation for their revolutionary activities.

The right- wing extremists sound self-righteously assertive about being white, Christian, and promoting racial and ideological purity. One level of meaning in "One Battle After Another" is political, with an explicit injunction to continue to struggle for social justice, freedom, sexual freedom, and vanguard actions for the underdog; the combat is against the harsh and punitive structures of social and personal oppression. The revolutionaries fight for the victims and most vulnerable members of American society includes the combat against the forces of authoritarianism, bourgeois morality, bourgeois respectability, conformism, and willingness to compromise or accommodate to the establishment state and its institutions. The language as well as the practice of the revolutionaries is confrontational, angry, and provocative, the status quo is pictured as bad and oppressive. Theirs is a mindless politicization, full of gross dichotomies, and Manichean views of good against bad. There is also an impatience with gradual change, a rejection of electoral politics, alliances with other progressives or liberals, and a repudiation of non-violence.

The speech and the militancy of this group is designed to heighten existing social and political contradictions in society, in order to usher in a new age of radical hope and radical renewal, where the last shall be first. Much of its actions are misguided, even naïve, given that the consequences of their militancy and language catalyze an extreme and violent repression. This repression effectively demolishes the hopes and aspirations of this generation of revolutionaries, leaving them in a state of massive trauma, grief, and numbness about the loss of their utopian aspirations. They suffer from moral injury as well. None of them considered how the revolution might be destructive and self-destructive to them as individuals, catastrophic to their families, relationships, and to themselves. The generation of failed revolutionaries in this film are a shattered, exhausted, and dissociated crew, unable to rebuild themselves and their families without massive struggle. The film's chief focus is to shed light on these multiple losses and disintegrating personality dynamics, particularly how it impacts family dynamics and father-daughter relationships.

The second and more profound level of meaning resides in the father-daughter relationship, which constitutes the heart of the movie. The battle for Bob Ferguson to become a good-enough father to his daughter Willa is the core of the film, with its most powerful reverberations for the audience. Bob, played by Leonardo Di Caprio, is a stoned

paranoid former revolutionary leftist who is bewildered, lost, confused, and spaced out by the trauma of the failure of his revolutionary group to change society. He genuinely loves his daughter, worrying about whether his previous radical activities will adversely effect her development as an adolescent and young woman. As he grieves his losses and his major defeats, he becomes a wounded human being. Anderson, himself, has explored the theme of the damaged father in other films; this movie continues and deepens his reflections on the profundity of this damage, including concern that these aberrations will distort and be transferred to his daughter, resulting in the transmission of inter-generational trauma. Bob is also a paranoid with real enemies. He has been living in hiding for sixteen years, while being hunted down by the repressive state and its police emissaries. Their intention is transparent: to arrest or assassinate former revolutionaries. His past also puts Willa in grave danger in the present.

Willa, played by Chase Infiniti, is the daughter of Perfidia Beverly Hills, a ridiculous name, but one which captures the darkness and treachery of her character. Bob does not know that Willa Is actually the daughter of Perfidia and the corrupt, violent, and sado-masochistic character Colonel Steven J. Lockjaw, played by Sean Penn. At a critical point in the film, Willa chooses not to tell Bob that he is not her biological father, an act of kindness and compassion. Lockjaw lives up to his name, playing out his life with massive emotional disavowal, character armor rigidity, and military demeanor; his inability to open his jaw becomes a metaphor for his internal deadness, his closed mindedness, the absence of empathy to others. Being a father in this story is not grounded in biology or genetics. It grows out of the relationship between parent and child.

Lockjaw's opportunistic alliance with the reactionary right Christmas Adventurer's Club results in his near fatal shooting and horrific automobile accident orchestrated by one of their flunkies. His face gets mutilated, but he survives. He is later inducted into the Club, even though the members despise him. After investigating his sexual relations with Perfidia, a black woman, they accuse him of "dirtying his dick" by having sex with her. Ultimately Lockjaw is gassed and cremated by the white supremacist cabal, annihilating him the ways Nazis committed genocide against Jews in concentration camps. His dynamic of identification with the aggressor becomes lethal and self-destructive without the slightest degree of awareness. He failed to imagine that the aggressors could turn their murderous rage and racism on him.

Bob's growing relationship with his daughter Willa evolves into something transformational for both of them. This is the humanist center of the story, the depiction of his genuine tenderness for her. Bob is white and Willa is a person of color, the daughter of a black woman. Race does not seem to be in obstacle in their growing intimacy, affection, and mutuality. Bob is shown holding the enfant Willa in his arms at her birth. When her

mother, apparently suffering from post-partum depression, abandons Willa and Bob, in order to save herself from prison, Bob remains Willa's parental care taker. Perfidia is a self-absorbed and self-serving individual long before and after her pregnancy. Bob slowly evolves from an inept, overwhelmed, frightened emotional parent into one who is loving and capable of providing Willa with the space she needs to be expansive; this enables her to find her own agency, to discover her own voice, and to venture into the world of relationships and protest politics with her own independent voice and consciousness.

Though she begins life as a parentified child, she will not follow Bob's past incarnation as a revolutionary militant, instead inventing her own modes of dissent and protest. She is a key mediating figure between the committed past of her parents and the emergence of a new kind of political engagement in the present. Her engagement will not be indebted to her parent's misguided and naïve version of politics; it will also be a more progressive and responsive commitment to changing times in the here and now.

Willa is first presented as a child who is the caretaker of her father, lacking a mother and a competent, well integrated father. She opposes Bob's abuse of marijuana, his driving recklessly while drunk. She objects to being his baby sitter. In anger, she tells Bob to "fuck off," to "grow up," and to get his act together. She needs a mature parental presence, not one marked by Bob's melancholy over past failures, his instability, fatigue, confusion, and inability to organize his life in the present. Bob had participated in dangerous and lethal activity during his revolutionary years. The after effects are symptoms of paranoia, isolation, guilt, burnout, disturbed relationships, and a fragmented sense of self. Though he genuinely loves Willa, he fears he may be unfit as a father, that he may be an unreliable protector of his child. Realizing he participated in political violence, made bad decisions, he carries great guilt for his past actions. Bob is also challenged in terms of memory recall, sometimes comically, at times tragically. Anderson is intimating that the ideological battles of the past result in broken families, trauma, guilt, regret and strained if not dysfunctional relationships. Most profoundly, Bob believes that his previous ideological choices may endanger or damage Willa. We see Bob watching the truly revolutionary film "The Battle of Algiers," a film capturing the horror and courage of those struggling for Algerian independence. The film and the battle it portrays radically contrasts with his own failed revolutionary posturing and melancholia; it highlights the difference between genuine revolutionary activity and political theater.

Willa helps Bob evolve into a responsible human being. Bob figures out how to comb his black daughter's hair. In a meeting with Willa's teacher, Bob is moved to tears finding out that she is doing well as a student, that she is emerging as a leader of other students, and that she has the potential to excel. Bob tells the teacher that she grew up without her mother, that her mother had died. The father-daughter relationships helps Bob to

transcend being "fuckin paranoid." His connection to her becomes affirming of her internal battles to mature and to venture out into relationships and the political arena with her own distinct points of view. She will not get mired in the flawed worldviews and political shenanagans of her parents deriving from another era. Whether Willa will emulate her mother's politics and aggressive political style, or forge her own direction, remains an open and ambiguous issue in the film. I am inclined to think she will discover her own form of political engagement, not following either parent. Anderson's comments before and after winning the Academy Awards support this view of his intention in the film.

Willa's relationship with her Sensei instructor, Sensi Sergio St. Carlos, beautifully acted by Benicio Del Toro, serves as a transitional father relationship, opening her up to a deeper intimacy with her father Bob. The practice of Sergio's martial arts studio, devoted to the principles of "courage, respect, and honor" help Willa to find those positive qualities in herself and Bob. Senei in Japanese refers to an individual, usually a teacher or instructor, who commands devotion, due to his experience and his earned authority. By the end of the film, after the DNA test proving that she is Lockjaw's biological daughter, Willa asserts that Bob is her real father. She tells Lockjaw not to answer for her, that she has her own voice. The brutal Lockjaw criticizes her for not wearing enough make up, thinking it would make her look prettier. He calls her a "smartass," with a violent and hostile mouth exactly like the voice of her mother Perfidia. Dehumanizing and objectifying her racially, he refers to her as "you fucking mutt." He also attacks her with offensive racial epithets, calling her "a wetback half bred" with no manners. She is summed up atrociously as "a little bitch child." Lockjaw is a bad-enough father with little or no redeeming features.

The contrast of the two dads remains a powerful and humanizing point in the film, providing a rich counterpoint. When Bob shows Willa the letter from her mother, he explains he tried to protect her from her "mother's shit," that is the lasting legacy of her murderous legacy, her betrayals, her self-centeredness, and her abandonment of both Bob and Willa. Perfidia had named names, provided locations, and exposed her former comrades to arrests and assassination in exchange for her freedom in protective custody. She then escaped to Mexico. She is a dubious hero.

With the fictional character Perfidia, we encounter a woman whose sexuality is another form of rebellion against the system. Her sexuality becomes linked to her power, which she uses strategically. For her intimacy is detached and instrumental. Perfidia seems more driven by ambition, anger, and survival than by ideological concerns. She appears to reject conventional family structures in the assertion of her personal power. With her, sexual liberation and political liberation are fused, not just intertwined. As her sexuality becomes politicized, its moral ambiguity becomes clear; both her sexuality and her politics may collapse together. Pussy power is part of her confrontational style and radical politics.

Pussy power challenges and mocks male dominance in society and within the revolutionary movement. Her sexual provocations assume a political language, serving to shock and destabilize the male characters in the film. The death of the black armed security guard in the film, a murder she may have committed, causes the bank robbery to spin out of control. Once again political violence unleashes irreversible consequences.

Perfidia emerges as a killer and betrayer in the story's landscape. From an analytic perspective, we might see Perfidia's sexuality as a form of sexualized aggression alternating with aggressivized sexuality. Clearly, her erotic desire is mostly destructive. She is erotically sadistic and sadistically erotic. Her erotic proclivities illustrate multiple levels of betrayal. Her Eros may be more akin to Thanatos, to a death or destructive drive. Some black critics of the film have vehemently objected to it as racist, as one which embodies the white, male, objectifying gaze toward sexually active black women; they see the film as trafficking in racial tropes, especially around the Jezebel stereotype. In this version, Perfidia is portrayed as yet another example of a black women behaving in an inherently hypersexual and manipulative manner. I, myself, did not experience the film as racist. On the contrary, I found it exposing and rejecting toward a full spectrum of racism. Works of art operate on many levels simultaneously, beyond the reach of those wishing to reduce them based on single issues. Anderson's film is a work of art and needs to be appreciated in its multi-dimensionality, including its contradictions.

Bob hoped to be the one Willa could trust, that she could confide in, relate to intimately. She authentically calls him dad. She sees him as her father, including his flaws, limitations, vulnerabilities, and shattered self. As the film ends after the reading of the letter from Perfidia, Bob does not try to stop Willa from continuing to battle against social injustice and the structural problems of the American anti-egalitarian establishment and hierarchical state system. He tenderly tells her to be careful, as she begins her three hour car ride to Oakland, where she will continue the struggle by joining a public protest in that town. Willa replies with a question, "careful of what?" indicating some skepticism and some defiance, an unwillingness to accept Bob's authority. Oakland, of course, is the town where the Black Panthers originated. It was also where they were savagely repressed. Willa will not emulate Bob's tactical militancy but rather construct her own forms of engagement, more appropriate for the current times, more in tune with her personality and with the future possibilities of social, political, cultural, and personal change.

Anderson may also be linking the stories of wounded fathers with the ways the failure of the paternal function operates in contemporary America. This is left implicit and ambiguous in this work of art. The audience must piece it together. He is suggesting that the absent, tyrannical, fraudulent, emotionally unstable, paranoid, melancholic fathers not only generate confusion and trauma in the next generation, but also illustrate something

fundamentally broken in the American political and institutional establishment. Damaged fathers may be seen as metaphors for authority itself, for the failures and abominations of capitalism, organized religion and its complicity with hatred and established authority, stalemated two party politics, and antiquated traditions. The manic or obsessional search for a strong father figure may result in a return to toxic forms of masculinity and the collective obedience to an authoritarian or dictatorial leader. All of these are unstable paternal structures. Without a strong and stable father, children are unable to disidentify from their mothers; they then experience trouble in separating and individuating from their parents, encountering great difficulty in transitioning into social reality, that is, having a firm grasp of what is real and realistic, including an awareness of boundaries. Fathers are necessary to establish law, limits, recognition, and not just enforce primal power relations. Just as he did for American veterans of the Viet Nam War, Daniel Shay's concept of "moral injury" may also apply to a generation of failed American revolutionaries. Moral injury shatters personal identity and results in ethical and relational collapses. Moral injury applies to those who witnessed or participated in political, wartime, or other bloody atrocities.

Finally, the film may contain many personal and autobiographical components for Anderson. He has been in a long term relationship with Maya Rudolph a black woman, and former cast member of S.N.L. They have four children together, including two daughters. Some critics have called the film "an emotional autobiography." It deals with the emotionally unreliable but still essential father who needs to become conscious of the children's perspective, parental responsibility, and generational inheritance. Hegel famously wrote "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk." True understanding of history, including comprehension of generational conflict, may only emerge after the historical event has ended. Anderson's film then belongs to a genre of promoting deeper reflection and introspection about politics and father-daughter dynamics. It does not traffic in prediction or the simplistic replication of worn-out ideological battles. These battles are now devoid of solid intellectual substance, while being saturated with dangerous emotional fall out and disastrous psychic repercussions. As we wage new battles, engage new struggles, finding new forms of combat to create a more just society, we need a less damaged generation to participate in these contemporary, potentially creative constructions.

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